

MAK'S DIVYA VAIBHAVAM

Thiruvayipatti Raghavalah



TRUNALA TRUPATI DEVASTHANAMS

TRUPATI



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ALVAR'S' DIVYA VAIBHAVAM

THIRUVAYIPATI RAGHAVALAH



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2004

ALVAR'S DIVYA VAIBHAVAM

by

T. Raghavalah

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FOREWORD

The Alvars were the earliest saint-poets in the country, who propagated the glory of Sriman Narayana through their soul-stirring pasurams. According to modern scholars they flourished between seventh and ninth century A.D.

As the name Alvar implies, they were immersed in their ecstatic experiences of Lord Krishna and they celebrated the Lord's abundant grace and majestic power in their outpourings of devotion, aptly called "Aruliceyal." These hymns were collected in a corpus of four thousand verses by Acharya Nathamuni, known as Nalayira Divya Prabandham. These God-realised souls who are twelve in number, emphasised the need for prapatti or surrender to the Lord.

The present work written by Sri Raghavaiah is a detailed study of the Alvars' contribution to Bhakthi literature, basing on Sri Vaishnavism. Our efforts will be amply rewarded if this publication helps the readers take to a serious study of the works of the Alvars.

*Executive Officer
T.T. Devasthanams*



Sreemath Rāmānujāchārya

(The expounder of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha, and
the Geetha Bhashyakara)

Sanskrit slokas in praise of Sri Rāmānuja

1. Yō nithyam achyutha pādāmbuja yugma
rukma
 Vyāmohithah thaditharani Thrinaya mēnē |
 Asmath gurōho bhagavathōsya dayaika sindhō
 Ramanujasya charanau sarānam prapadhyē ||

Substance:

In utter devotion, I surrender to the feet of Sri Ramanuja, Mine Acharya Divine, the deep ocean of Mercy and Love, He, who is ever enamoured only of the golden lotus feet twain of The Omnipresent, the eternal, treating every other treasure as straw.

2. Eṛkaika pūrusha surakshitha vamsareethyā
 Guptā prapatthi padavī purushaihi puranaihi |
 Ramanujāsthu parayā dayayā dayāluhu
 Seema mima mathiyayau Jagathām Hithāya | |

Substance:

The supreme wisdom of “Prapatthi Marga” that has ever been from ages long, kept on, in secret, from one Acharya to his successor Acharya all along, was, for the first time, universally proclaimed open and loud to All by the gracious Ramanuja to deliver from sin the humanity All.

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1. Introduction

It is common and traditional with most men of letters and writers to ascribe unbelievable mysteries and miracles to the sacred stories of great and wise sages of pious and devotional eminence. Here in this book on the Twelve Alvars' biographies and philosophies, the readers find not any aspect or account away from truth, reality and nature.

The true and divine messages, that Vishnu, the universal lording force or energy is omnipresent and omnipotent, that the spirit of selflessness alone leads to happiness and deliverance from sin, and that the emotional feeling of oneness with nature and creation is the divine experience of perfect bliss, are stressed through the pure lives of the Alvars narrated sentiments receive with acceptance and satisfaction the contents of this book.

Care has been taken by me to render the contents of the book in an easy and flexible style; but it has become inevitably necessary to use certain technical terms of philosophic import and certain Sanskrit words and terms for appropriateness to convey the correct and exact sense. Care has been taken to see that the matter is driven home to the minds of the readers in proper understanding way or style.

The pictures published in the book at the outset are appropriately related to each other and one another from the stand point of the philosophic guidance they are meant to afford the readers.

This book is an English version of the Telugu Alvarula Divya Vaibhavam, which has already been published by Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams. This is done for the benefit of a wider range of readers, beyond Telugu knowing population, belonging to all the regions of Bharath and

abroad. The aim of the author is to reveal to the world the truth and universalism of Hinduism - Surrender - Selflessness - Service, the substance of Alvars' way of life.

As my parents, Thiruvayipatti Thiruvengadaiah and Lakshamma, had been devoted to Tirumala Sri Venkateswara all their life, I feel it proper to dedicate this book to Sri Venkateswara of Tirumala and to give away full-free and unconditional copy rights to T.T. Devasthanams, as I did in the case of Telugu Alvarula Divya Vaibhavam.

The Author,
-(sd)

1-5-1980

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2. The Twelve Alwārs

The Tamil word, Alvar, means, "one who has dived deep into", "One who has learnt the depth of" – what ? The depth of truth, the depth of devotion to the Omni-present, the depth of bliss, the pure and perfect happiness. The Alvar is one who has attained the depth of bliss, the depth of the ocean of Paramananda through utter devotion to the omnipresent - force, power or energy personified as **Vishnu**.

The Alvar, who were always immersed in an emotional devotion to the omnipresent **Vishnu**, who experienced and enjoyed the divine and auspicious personified form of **Sri Vishnu** (the omnipresent) in their mental eye, who felt emotionally themselves one with God (the omnipresent), who imagined in a state of blissful emotion to see the form of God as Divya Mangala Vighraha (Divine beautiful form) and who sang loudly and openly, in a state of bliss, Sanskrit Slokas and Tamil pasuras (stanzas in Sanskrit and Tamil) in praise of God **Vishnu** (The omnipresent, the omnipotent and the omniscient power) were always enjoying a joyful swim in the ocean of divine bliss. Their bliss was endless, immeasurable and indescribable. Hence the term, "Alvar's Joy" has become proverbial to mean, "the end-less perfect joy", or "Paramananda". The term, "Alwar", has become proverbial to mean "A person, in liberation from all worries, anxieties and attachments, being ever in pure blissful state. The words 'Alvar', and 'Alvar Paramananda' are commonly in vogue in South India in this blissful sense. They were **Sarvasanga Parithyagis**, living in utter detachment.

The lives of the Alvars of the ancient times, which were supremely noted for their devotion, Prapatthi (the attitude of utter surrender) and a blissful state of perfect joy, were the source for Vaishnava Devotion and for Visishtadvaita Siddhantha of the future times in South India. It was Alvarula Divya Vaibhavam (the splendour of the lives and philosophy

of the Alvars) that inspired in future the Muni Thraya, or the Acharya Thraya (Nathamuni, Yamunacharya and Sri Ramanujacharya) who were the founders and propagators of Vaishnava Visishtadvaita Siddhantha, and who were famously known as 'Ubhaya Vedanta Pravarthakas' (those who observed and followed and preached with equal regard and respect the philosophy of the Sanskrit Vedas and that of Dravida Veda, or Dravida Divya Prabandha).

The first of the Muni Thraya (The Three Sages) was Srinathamuni, who was born in 824 A.D. at Mannargudi of Thanjavur district. He was a prodigy in Sanskrit and Tamil literatures. He took great pains to collect the writings of the Alvars, and all these productions put together are called "Nalayiram" (a collection of 400 Tamil pasuras). In this way Nadamuni strove hard for vaishnavism, and in his old age, he started for the first time, A Vaishnava Muth at the sacred Srirangam. Later, his grandson, Yamunacharya, also called Alavandar, who was a genius in the philosophies of Ubhaya Vedantha (Sanskrit Vedas and Dravida Divya Prabandha) vanquished many Advaita pandits and philosophers in logic and philosophic debates and discussions and established his eminence among the philosophers of his time. In obedience to the wishes of his grand father, Nathamuni, he became the head of the Vaishnava Muth of Srirangam, which he later called Vaishnava Visishtadvaita Muth for the propagation of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha.

The third and the last of the Muni Thraya was Srimath Ramanujacharya, who was born in 1017 A.D. at Sriperumbudur, a place at about 40 miles from the present Madras city in Chengalput district. In obedience to the will of Yamunacharya, his Guru, Ramanuja became the head of the Visishtadvaita Muth after the death of Yamunacharya. The Muni Thraya established the relation between the wisdom of Prasthan Thraya (The Vedas, the Brahma Suthras and the Geetha) and the sacred wisdom of the Alvars, and came to

be famously known as "Ubhaya Vedantha Pravarthakas" (those who followed with regard, respect and devotion both the wisdoms of Sanskrit Prasthanas and of the Alvars expressed in Nalayiram). Sri Ramanujacharya was the spiritual heir to the wisdom of the Alvars through Alavandar. A fuller account of the Munithraya can be had by the readers from the book, *Sriramanuja Divya Vaibhavam* written by the same author, T. Raghavaiah.

A knowledge of the lives and philosophy of the Alvars is quite necessary and ineluctable to understand the eminence and philosophy of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha propounded by Yathiraja Sriramanuja and the great social reform brought about by him. The Visishtadvaita Siddhantha and the Prapatthi Marga (spirit of devotion in utter surrender to the omnipresent) are two threads intertwined into one single stout rope of the truth of Hinduism.

The Alvars were twelve in number (called in Sanskrit Dwadasa Alvars or Dwadasa Suris), and the first three of them chronologically dated back to 3000 B.C. according to the common faith of the Vaishnava Acharyas and Vaishnava Pandits based on the authority of tradition and certain Dravida Prabandhas. But Historical records reveal that the lives of the twelve Alvars, who lived in different centuries, spread over 3 centuries from 6th to 9th centuries A.D.

Lord Buddha belonged to fifth century B.C. Jainism and Buddhism, which condemned the caste system and which preached prominently "Nishkama Karma Yoga" (the path of rendering righteous duties and acts not prompted by desires and selfishness) flourished well till the beginning of the Seventh Century A.D. under the patronage of Kings.

Owing to the influence of Jainism and Buddhism, the common people in general, other than the traditional Brahmin class, developed hatred and aversion towards the Vedic religion (the religion taught by the four Vedas) which

vehemently and bluntly stipulated that Sudras should not read the Vedas, that is, no other caste except Brahmins was eligible, by the scriptures, to read the Vedas. (By scriptures=By the authority of the scriptures). Though Buddhism taught proper discharge of righteous duties and deeds, the best ethical life was kindness to all creatures in creation, yet in course of time, it degenerated into atheism, and the people lost the spirit of devotion and surrender in general even towards elders; not to speak of the traditional gods; this unfortunate condition tended the people to become egoistic, egotistic, proud and callous. Respect for moral life became scarce.

At this stage of moral and philosophical degeneracy; the Alvars, who were great scholars, thoughtful wise men, and sages, felt that without to spirit of Bhakthi and Prapatthi (Devotion and surrender), ethical life could not sustain itself. Out of their generosity for the fellow-men, they thought of steps to be taken to instill into the minds of the people, the sentiments of Bhakthi and Prapatthi. They hoped that Bhakthi and Prapatthi alone would foster in the minds of the human beings, the qualities of selflessness, humility, simplicity, kindness, love and universal brotherhood. They thought of all this only for the welfare of the humanity. It was their clear contention that happiness of the individual or society was possible only by the Bhakthi Marga (The path of love and devotion). It is only in the minds of people of the spirit of surrender to the universal and omnipresent force that the seeds of peace, tolerance, friendliness and cooperation germinate. It is only when human beings are selfless that peace and friendship could exist among individuals, among societies, among races and among countries. For the eradication of selfishness in man, the individual should be taught to surrender to the omnipresent Vishnu, that is he has to imbibe to the Vaishnava Bhava or the Vaishnava Samslesha Bhava (the feeling of oneness with the universe and to enjoy the bliss of it). This is the best and the divine path, which the

Alvars had shown to the people, by their personal example for the welfare of the humanity.

The Alvar's Vishnu Samslesha Bhava is in a way, a Social Science; keep it apart as it is real philosophy. How can you expect development and happiness for a society, when the members of that society don't possess the qualities of love, devotion and morality. Ethics exist for social happiness.

It was not the Alvars' way, or practice to worship or adore the idol of one particular god. (The Vedas show plurality of gods). Their unique way of life was to sing in praise of the one supreme Sreeman Narayana, the personified symbol of the omnipresent life force, and in so singing about the countless auspicious qualities of **Vishnu**, they were ever swimming in the ocean of bliss. From the stand point of the conception of the Alvars, Sreeman Narayanamurti is not the name of one particular god. Grammarians interpret the word "Srimannarayana" to mean all the one thousand names of God (The omnipresent, or Vishnu) incorporated in Bhishma's Vishnu Sahasranama sthothra of the Mahabharatha. All the various and innumerable epithets (qualitative words or Guna Viseshanams) used by sages in the Vedas and Upanishads are found in **Vishnu Sahasra Namavali** of Bhishma's Vishnu Sahasra Nama sthothram. That is why the word "Srimannarayana" stands for oneness of God and inspires the wise scholars, thinkers and devotees for **Ekeswaropasana**.

While the Vedas advocate plurality of gods in certain chapters, the Upanishads advocate the one-ness of God by the name, **Vishnu** (omnipresent), which is more improvised in sense in the unique word, the jewel of the spoken word, "Srimannarayana". This most sacred and most meaningful word stands for "Anantha Kalyana Guna Prapurna" (the representative form of all the auspicious aspects and qualities), which is adopted by the Alvars in their mental association with God and enjoyment of the universal life energy. Hence "Om Namo Narayanaya" has become

Thirumanthra (the most sacred incantation). Thiru=Sacred, Manthra= incantation or utterance of a divine formula. Just as the scientific formula, H_2O , reveals "water" as a compound, the spiritual formula, "Om Namo Narayanaya" reveals "the whole universe and the universal lording force together with the sentiment of prapatthi (Surrender) to that incomprehensible power (Avāgmānasagōcharam)".

The pronouncement of Ashtakshari Manthra, with the consciousness of its full implications, tantamounts to admiring all the one thousand auspicious qualities of the omnipresent power, **Vishnu**. So it was thus the Alvars engaged themselves always in Anantha Kalyanaguna Ganam. (Ganam=singing, - Anantha Kalyanaguna=The endless line of auspicious qualities. Ashtakshari Manthra contains within itself three words, "Om namo Narayanaya" which amounting to 8 letters "Om na mo na ra ya na ya. Here "letters" means "syllables".

The Alvars maintained that the Vaishnava shakthi (omni present universal power) was Thribhuvana Sundara (universally beautiful - the most beautiful in all the three worlds of the pouranic belief, the Swarga, the Marthya and the Pathala). They believed that the Vaishnava Shakthi was "Truth, Goodness and Beauty". The Alvars admired equally both the Siva Bhava (the auspicious aspect) and the Rudra Bhava (the terrible aspect) of the same Vaishnava power. They felt the Vaishnava Power whenever a fine cool breeze touched their bodies; they also felt the magnificent wealth of the Vaishnava power in the midst of a strong storm. A small flowery shrub as well as a mighty oak tree equally inspire them and fill their minds with pleasure. It was thus the Alvars imagined and comprehended, loved and admired the Vaishnava power, responsible for creation, existence and death. They did not simply and physically worshipped the man-made idol. They were conscious of the ideal or aspect for which the idol stood and they worshipped and admired

the icon. Their society was the universe. They felt one with the universe and the creation.

Hence what is to be learnt by us from the lives and sentiments of the Alvars is that man should be above the petty distinctions of caste, race, language and custom; he should be a bundle of all auspicious qualities, he should render good and helping acts and he should be capable of rendering his life perfectly happy and pleasant. It is not the profession that is to be taken into account; what is to be considered is whether it is a righteous profession and whether it is discharged well. Importance should not blindly be attached to the traditional performances like the Vedic Yagnas and Yagas, the traditional customs, the Thilak (the coloured mark on the face), the fashions of dressing or cutting, or shaving the hair on the head. It should be the sincere aim and intention of man to lead a life of selflessness for the welfare of the wider world, while, being in a blissful state of mind in his surrender to the Vaishnava power, singing in praise of the auspicious qualities and aspects of **Vishnu**, which are beyond expression and comprehension.

Jealousy and malice were quite alien to the nature and constitution of the Alvars. They believed in the dictum. "Sarvam Vishnu Mayam Jagat" (each atom is filled with the Vaishnava energy; there is no atom or space uninfluenced by **Vishnu**), and were ever blissful at all times and in all conditions and circumstances. May the Alvars' sentiments, the Alvars' attitudes and the Alvars' wisdom ever flourish in the world! "Alvar Divya Darsanam Vardhatham Abhivardhatham!! (Divya Darsanam=Divine philosophy. Vardhatham!=may it flourish). This shall be the form of address between two individuals when they meet and greet each other !

As the Vedas and other scriptures are in Sanskrit, which language was known only to a few belonging to one particular community, and as it was the vedic injunction or

traditional custom that all were not eligible to read the Vedas, and as the contents of the scriptures were kept secret from the common people, it so happened that in course of time the Vedic traditions and the vedic traditional performances gradually turned meaningless, selfish and rigid and they were meant for the advantage of only one community, claiming recourse to and authority over the scriptures. This community became dictatorial in the conduct of Vedic performances and dictating principles of life to all other communities.

In such a deplorable situation, the wise and generous sages, the Alvars felt that, if the salient contents of the scriptures (the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Brahmasuthras and the Geetha) and the songs in praise of **Vishnu**, the embodiment of all auspicious qualities (Anantha Kalyana Guna Paripurna) were composed and sung in Tamil, the spoken language of all the people, the people would in all possibility embrace the Bhakthi and Prapatthi yogas (the two-fold path of devotion and surrender to the universal Lording force). Though the Alvars commanded profundity in the literature of Sanskrit, they were wise, generous, practical and psychological in their approach, they composed and sang melodious songs in Tamil language, conveying the gist of Prasthanas Thraya (Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Geetha) and the Puranas, of which Bhagavatham was paramount.

The people were much convinced and impressed with the joyful and emotional singing of devotional songs and pasuras by the Alvars. (A stanza in Tamil is called pasura, which has a special meaning as "a stanza capable of being sung in sweet, sonorous musical tunes". In the course of singing the pasuras, the Alvars appeared lost themselves in emotional ecstasy, bliss and the Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. They appeared that they were enjoying emotionally and psychologically, oneness with the nature and the Lord of nature, the Anantha Kalyana Paripurna. Some people thought that the Alvars were mystics endowed with great auspicious

and blissful powers, being in communion with the universal Lord. The common people were much carried away by the good conduct, the devotional ways and their love for people in general.

Further the Alvars did not follow any rigid and traditional customs. The Alvars never had an abodes of their own; they never developed any connection with the so called place of nativity or birth; they were not attached to a particular temple, or a particular icon of the Lord. They were, most of them, nomads moving from village to village singing joyfully Tamil pasuras in praise of **Vishnu**, or Sreemannarayana Murty, the Anantha Kalyana Guna Paripurna. Hence the Vedic religion came to be interpreted by them as a theistic religion based on kindness, love, universal brotherhood and **Vishnu Samslesha Bhava** (feeling of oneness with the nature and its Lording force, Easwara). The Atheistic trends, that were rampant then, were put an end to by their mission, life, devotion together with melodious pasuras of the Alvars.

The Alvars devotion to nature, the Lording force of nature, and their devotion to the welfare of all humanity were pure and genuine. They attached no importance to castes; they advocated universal brotherhood. Hence they respected not the age-old traditional customs, based on superstition, selfishness and narrow mindedness uninfluenced by truth, reason and logic. They wished that man should be conscious of the noble and divine ideal for which an idol in the temple exists. It is worthy of worship then, and hence it is named in Prabandhas Archavathara, the incarnation of the universal Lording force, **Vishnu**. The worship of the idol is similar to the pious reading of scriptures and ethics. Man should, with a spirit of devotion, love and surrender or humility, worship the divine idol with an alert mental consciousness of its significance; he should display such qualities of love, kindness and brotherhood to the fellow beings; thus people

should feel that they are the children of one and the same omnipresent power, **Vishnu**, and live in peace, amity and joy; and this type of living is said to be realising God or living with God - and this is the divine mission of the Alvars. The Alvar spoke and sang what they felt; they did what they spoke. They were thus embodiments of purity, selflessness and joy.

“God” means “the entire Chara (living), the Achara (physical) and the incomprehensible or animate Eswara power, or inanimate which is all-pervading”. “To be in association with God” means “to feel himself one with the nature and creation”. The Siddhantas of Advaita, and Visishtadvaita were the same as the Alvars' Vishnu Samslesha-Bhava-philosophy. The former two had their source from the latter one. It was by the Alvars' life, work and mission that the Vedic religion and theism were rejuvenated, and that the paths of Devotion and Surrender (Bhakthi and Prapatthi) were propagated widely and enthusiastically. The Alvars laid the sacred foundation stone for *Bhakthi Bhava* (the yoga path of devotion). The people and the kings were delighted and attracted by the Alvars' trends of love and devotion, which they observed with zeal and joy. They took interest in Daiva Kainkaryas, the acts of piety and worship in temples and at homes, and the acts of kindness rendered to human society.

All the Alvars, except the first four who were contemporaries, were associated with the Sriranganatha temple of sacred Srirangam. The Alvars felt that of all the divine idols in all the Vishnu temples of the ancient times (now also) the Ranganatha swami idol of Sreerangam was the most perfect representative of the universe and the universal lording force, personified as **Vishnu** or Sreemannarayana. As the Divine omnipresent power (The Vaishnava Sakthi) was responsible for the existence of any creature, or a live molecule, life first pervaded in water. It

was first believed that the world was in full form at first when life had its first concrete appearance (The is scientific). ("Nara" means water and hence "Narayana" which means "that which pervades water" stands for the divine power (incomprehensible power), which is responsible for the existence of every creature from the micro-germs in the moss to the elephant).

The idol of Sriranganatha is completely representative of all creation and the personification of creator. Hence it is "Archavatara". As Sriranganatha idol is representative of the omnipresent and omnipotent force or energy, it is depicted that the Lotus flower emerged from the navel of the idol. It is represented that the creator, Brahma, emerged from the Lotus. The Sudarsana Chakra (the Eternal wheel) in one of the four hands of the idol represents the **Kala Chakra**, which is a symbolic representation of Time which is eternal, without a beginning, a middle and an end. The divine energy is omnipresent in all space which is symbolised in the Panchajanya (the Conch-Shell) in one of the hands of the idol. Panchajanya stands for sound and life pervading in the entire space. Don't the electrical sound waves represent the all pervasiveness of the divine energy? The divine power is beyond all comprehension, and hence the idol is represented to be lying in the **Beyond**, the remainder or **Sesham**. It is thus Sriranganatha is represented as **Seshasayi** (lying in the beyond). As God is represented as **peace** (Santhi), he is called Shatari (the embodiment of peace), he is represented lying eternally (Ananthasayana) as Seshasayi. (Satha = anger. Ari = Enemy. Sathari=the enemy of anger, that is peace. Anantha=endless. Sayana=lying, Anantha Sayana=lying endlessly, that is all pervading). As the omnipresent power (**Vishnu**) is responsible for all wealth in the universe, this aspect of God is represented by the presence of Sri Lakshmi. It is thus the Archavathara, Sriranganatha of Srirangam, is the representation of the entire universe. And the Alvars felt it so.

When a devotee visits this Archavathara with a consciousness of all its implications, he gets into an emotional reverie, thinking of the omnipresence and the omnipotence of **Vishnu** and dwells in bliss. This was the experience of the Alvars, when they witnessed any Archavathara (idol of Vishnu).

Hence all the latter eight Alvars, wherever they were born and wherever they were moving, were emotionally attached to Sriranganatha of Srirangam, the complete symbolic representation of **Vishnu**. Worship of the idol should thus be meaningful, enlightening, emotional, and psychological; and it is wrong for a person to think that the idol is a stone. The Ranganatha idol is not merely a symbol of Vishnu; it is a perfect symbolic representation of **Vishnu**; emotionally the devotee feels it as the image of the personified **Vishnu** and enjoys its presence before him and feels one with it in his **Vishnu Samslesha Bhava**. As the Vaishnava Shakthi is everything, it is both Sivam-and-Santham (auspicious and peaceful) and Roudram (terrible) and Pralayam (complete destruction). The real devotee, like the Alvar, receives all these aspects in a spirit of equanimity, meditates upon the divine and the Eternal power and lives in Bliss (Paramanandam).

The Alvars were twelve in number reverentially called by devotees "Dwadasalvars" or "Dwadasa Suris". They belonged to different castes and communities, but they won the minds and appreciation of all people belonging to all castes and sections. It was due to their erudition, devotion and above all their affection and generosity for fellow-men.

Of the twelve Alvars one was a maiden; one was a panchama by caste; one was a Kshatriya king; three were Brahmins; one was a tribal chief; one was a Sudra; three were (with Andal four) Ayonisambhavas, whose parentage was unknown; and one was the son of a Brahmin father and a Sudra mother.

For one, to realise God (the truth, the omnipresent energy or power) and to realise that he himself is a speck of the omnipresent Vishnu, the mere Vedic recitals, the observations of orthodox customs and principles and procedures, the performance of yagnas and yagas and similar other scriptural performances and the worship of and prayers to the plurality of gods - all these are not the proper ways - all these don't help him to realise the truth, which is God, the **Vishnu** (The omnipresent). But which are the proper methods to achieve or to realise the truth? - Prapatthi (surrender) to the omnipresent power, love, courtesy and kindness to all fellow beings, innate goodness and selflessness are the sure ways to realise the truth, and to realise perfect happiness (Paramanandam). It was by this supreme Marga (way or method) that the Alvars achieved the Truth.

They were not contented with their realisation of **Vishnu** and **Paramānandam**; they taught these ways to their fellowmen by singing **Pāsuras** on **Vishnu** (Truth, Beauty and Goodness) and by their personal example of ecstatic joy (Paramanandam) in their Anantha Kalyana Gana Gana with Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. It was the Alvars who at first in our country (or in the world) laid the foundation for this type of ecstatic devotion giving rise to knowledge, wisdom, joy and social service.

The Alvar constantly stressed that realisation of Truth, the omnipresent **Vishnu**, was for the devotee of Prapatthi Marga and not for the reciters or chaunters of Vedic hymns and the performers of Vedic rituals and yagnas and yagas - what does it clearly mean? - "Absence of fear and born of happiness are available only for devotees of Prapatthi Yoga. The Saranagathas (devotees of surrender) are selfless and they wish for Loka Kalyana (the welfare of all) - Hence perfect happiness is their privilege, their right, their desert. The so called scholars, who are proud of their Vedic erudition and

who perform Vedic ceremonies and performances cannot dream of contentment and happiness; on the other hand they die in their stupidity, or obstinacy. They are far away from Daiva Kripa (Paramānandam).

“**Mōksha Sādhana** (striving for deliverance from bondage, or sin and to attain Paramanandam, or bliss eternal) is the privilege of all communities, and it is not the special prerogative of one community only”; This is proved by the lives of the Alvars themselves. the Varnāsrama Dharmas (caste system and caste duties) established by the Vedas, in course of time, created more and more differences and feelings of illwill among the people of one and the same nationality. The so called Agrakulajas (people belonging to the highest caste), even while receiving all services and sevas from the other Varnas (castes), began ill treating them. This was nothing but ingratitude and cruelty, rather inhumanness. It was as a result of this extreme cruelty and ingratitude and inhumanness, that Buddhism and Jainism rose to fight against and to put an end to this social atrocity. But unfortunately, as already narrated before, the Buddhist Monks, in course of time, turned egoistic, forgot their righteous duties of sympathy and service, and turned arrogantly atheistic. As a result, atheism took firm roots among people; atheism was nothing but irresponsibility coupled with callousness. [Atheism can be taken as one opposite of dogmatic theism which advocates dogmatic worship and prayers to plurality of gods for achieving their foolish desires. Real and meaningful theism is different : It is an awareness of the universal, omnipresent and omnipotent energy of which every one is a speck; it is a feeling of universal brotherhood; it is a feeling of respect for truth, goodness and beauty, together with forming the **Vishnu** (the omnipresent); and hence it is a feeling of selflessness and surrender, resulting in service. Hence theism, in this sense, is responsibility, peace, service and joy]. In a true sense, theism is scientific and rational !

The social chaos and calousness, brought out by the degeneracy of sacred Buddhism and Jainism, the ray of hope for the bewildered humanity was the advent of the Alvars, who believed that devotion and surrender (Bhakthi and Prapatthi) would help to develop cooperation, love, regard and happiness among the people.

The Siddhantas of Advaita and Visishtadvaita recorded in books of the sacred Sanskrit language was accessible only to scholars or pandits to understand and assimilate. But the "Devotion-Surrender path" (Bhakthi - Prapatthi Marga) which is the essence of the two Siddhantas, if properly understood, grants deliverance from sin. This path of devotion-surrender is both for the educated and the uneducated; it is for all human beings in general irrespective of class, section, caste, creed and religion whatsoever. And this boon of Devotion-surrender was accorded to the humanity by the kind and generous Alvars. The entire knowledge and wisdom of all the twelve Alvars (Alvarula Divya Vaibhavam) will have its safe and brightening resort in future, in Srimadramanujacharya (1017-1137 A.D.) who was the propounder of the Visishtadvaita Siddhanta.

As Alvars were so kind and devoted sages, that the Tamil pandits and devotees considered them to have been born on this earth in the aspects of Lord **Vishnu**. The Alvars were the fore-runners of the Muni Thraya (The three Acharyas, namely, Srinatha muni, Yamunacharya, and Sri Ramanuja), of the future centuries, who were enlightened, guided and inspired in their life and achievements by the splendour of Alvars' lives and missions.

The following are the twelve Alvars chronologically speaking with the Vaishnava aspects (Divine aspects) of which they were born in this world :

1) Poyigai Ālvār - The devotees believed him to have been born in the aspect of Vishnu Murti's Panchajanya, one of Sri Vishnu's Panchayudhas (The five weapons of Lord Sri Vishnu).

2) Bhūthālvār or Pūdatthālvār - born in the aspect of Kaumodaki (Vishnu's mace or club, one of Panchayudhas).

3) Peyālvār - born in the aspect of Nandaka, the sword of Lord Vishnu (one of God's Panchayudhas).

4) Thirumalizhai Ālvār - born in the aspect of Sri Vishnu's Sudarsana Chakra (one of Panchayudhas).

The above four Alvars were contemporaries and their parentage is not traceable. The details will be noted in the respective chapters about the life of each individual Alvar.

5) Kulasēkharālvār, the Kerala King - born in the aspect of Kousthubha Mani, the jewel or the precious stone worn by Lord Vishnu on his chest.

6) Thondaradippodi Ālvār, also known as Vipranarayana. He was said to have been born in the aspect of Vijayanthimala, the ever fresh and never fading garland of flowers and Thulasi. He was born in Brahmin community.

7) Thiruppāni Ālvār - born in the aspect of Srivatsalanchanam, a curl or twist in the hair on the chest of Sri Vishnu. He was born in Panchama caste.

8) Thirumangai Ālvār - born in the aspect of Sarngam, the great bow of Sri Vishnu. He was born in a type of kshatriya tribal race.

9) Periyālvār - Also known as Vishnuchittha, was born in the aspect of the great dignified, decorated, large and lofty car (Ratham) of Sri Vishnu of Vaikuntham. He was born in Brahmin community.

10) Āndāl - also known as Goda Devi - She was found in the furrow (as a baby) in the Thulasi garden by Periyālvār, and was brought up by him. She was considered to be Sri Lakshmi, the divine consort of the Lord. She was considered as Ayonija. Hence, her dependents can't be determined as in the case of the first three Alvars.

11) Nammālvār - born in the aspect of Vishvaksena, the commander of Vishnu's retinue. He was born in a Sudra community, the toddy tappers' community.

12) Madhurakavi Ālvār - born in the aspect of Garuda, the vehicle of Sri Vishnu. He was born in the Brahmin caste.

These identities of the Alvars are furnished in the Dravida Prabandhas (the ancient Tamil testaments of the Vaishnava Visishtadvaita faith). "Vishnu" stands for the universe and the universal sustaining power (The concrete material and the abstract energies or powers). Its twelve aspects of Vishnu as cited above are the aspects of which the twelve Alvars were born, it means that the twelve aspects of Vishnu form the entire universe. It is as follows :

1) The Pāñchajanya is a symbol of sound which is all pervasive. It indicates the limitlessness of the universal space, which is called Akasa (sky), one of the five elements (Panchabhuthas) constituting the universe. The Panchajanya, the sound producing agency, is a symbol for language and literature.

2) Kaumōdaki, the Vishnu's club or mace, is a symbol for battle or struggle. In the universe, there is an eternal and endless struggle going on between one force and another. Here the moral powers are to be considered more important than the physical powers - The aspiration or principle, that the virtue should suppress the evil, is indicated by the Mace.

3) The Nandaka is the sword. Man requires the knife or the sword for establishing a habitation for himself. It is the main and the original tool. "May the person cut off the evil with the sword of his moral goodness" is what is symbolised in the Nandaka.

4) The Sudarsana Chakra is a symbol of time, which is eternal - without a beginning, a middle and an end. It also indicates the "Adimadhyantharahitha" aspect of the universal every. The universe and the time concept are inter-related.

5) The Kousthubha Mani is the costliest and the most valuable thing in the world. Its actual value cannot be estimated. It is a symbol of the endless wealth of the nature of this world.

6) The Vijayanthi Mala, the garland of flowers and Thulasi, worn by Sri Vishnu is said to be ever fresh and never fading. This symbolises the unending and profuse wealth of natural vegetation of this world. When you take one particular plant or tree or flower, we can observe its growth and decay. But when you take the entire vegetation of all regions of the world into account, you find the fresh, green and blooming vegetation some where or other. For instance, on the Himalayas and similar lofty mountains or at a particular contour, you find the ever green trees. Just as there is the sun rise always on one longitude or the other, successively all the day, you can also witness fresh tender foliage and blossoms some where or other at all times of the year. Hence Vijayanthi Mala signifies the unending natural vegetation of this world. It is as if the world is God and the vegetation there on is the garland. So Vijayanthi Mala is not to be taken to mean a particular small garland. It should be taken to mean the entire vegetation adorning the surface of the earth and water; and this nature of vegetation has its life and fostering from the omnipresent and omnipotent Vaishnava energy or power.

7) Srivatsalanchanam, a curl or twist of hair on Vishnu's Chest, symbolises the whirl or the fathomless ocean. It is the fathomless ocean of kindness and mercy. It is the limitless and boundless ocean of kindness of which the possessor is Vishnu. And man should be an ocean of kindness as he is a part of Vishnu, and as Vishnu dwells in him. It is the quality of mercy that fosters the world or the society. The lack of that causes fear, and destruction. We all pray to God for mercy and the same prayer should teach us to render the deeds of mercy. Mercy is the life of the world. Mercy is twice-blessed;

it blesseth him, gives him and takes. Mercy is the life of the world, the nature, the society and the individual. Hence its place is the heart of man. That is why Srivatsalanchanam is said to adorn Vishnu's chest.

Sri + Vatsa + lanchanam = All good and all auspicious + child + Mark = The mark or sign for an auspicious child; and this mark is on Vishnu's chest. It means that God Vishnu keeps the welfare of each creation on earth in his heart. So God is the seat of love (Vatsalya). When god is said to be all pervading, the aspiration of the devotee is that mercy and love should be abundant, and every where, for the peace and happiness of the world. How figuratively beautiful and fine the symbol, Sri Vatsalanchanam is !

Sri = All good and auspicious qualities and aspects. Sri Vatsa = The child symbolising all virtues. Lanchanam =symbol or mark. Srivatsalanchanam = Vishnu spoken of as Ananthakalyanaguna Paripurna in the Visishta-dvaita Siddhantha.

Sri Vishnu bears Sri Lakshmi (the personified Goddess, Jagajjanani, in his chest. It means he bears Kousthubha Mani (the symbol of all wealth and happiness) and Sri Vatsa, the symbol of Dayadi Anantha Kalyanaguna (Mercy and all other auspicious qualities). As man is a speck of the omnipresent, **Vishnu**, he is expected to be Anantha Kalyana Gunakara. In that case we expect peace, progress and happiness for the world.

8) Sārngam is the Vishnu's bow which is a sign of Sakthi or power. It is symbolic of all the weapons of fighting or battle. It is a symbol for the need to destroy evil in this world. In fact, every moment, in this world, the fostering of certain aspects of life and the destruction of certain other aspects of life are going on endlessly - Sishta Rakshana and Dushta Sikshna are ever the duties of this world. They are the aspects of Vaishnava Shakthi.

9) Vishnu's chariot is a symbol of grandeur, loftiness, ostentation, happiness and encouragement. As the car festival of a famous temple like that of Kanchipuram or Sreerangam is so grand, magnificent and enlivening, man should similarly be lofty minded and lofty hearted with qualities of grandeur, liberality, generosity and tolerance etc. and stand as a help and encouragement to fellowmen. The grand existence of the universe with its eternal forces is symbolised in the Chariot. The chariot is thus representative of one aspect of the universe and the universal sustaining power.

10) Bhūdevi (the Goddess of earth) is of Pancha-bhuthas (Prithvi = Earth, the physical substance, AP = water, Thejaha = Light, Vayu = Air, Akasam = the space). Andal represents Goda Devi or Bhudevi or the world. This world stands for all the globes of the universe. Hence the world of ours is one of the aspects of Vishnu, the omnipresent power.

11) Vishvaksēna is the commander of Sri Maha Vishnu's retinue. He is a symbol for leadership. For the discharge of any great task, a number of persons are wanted. And if all these persons have to discharge their duties well, an efficient leader is necessary. Without proper leadership, no work can be accomplished well and successfully. As Vishnu is said to be the protector, or fosterer requiring leadership qualities, Vishvaksena represents the leadership quality, which is essential for the proper conduct of the world. The implication is that each person should have this quality of leadership, which is a aspect of Vishnu.

12) Garuda is a symbol of power, movement and speed, which are the aspects of certain universal forces.

Thus it can be inferred that all the twelve aspects, represented by the twelve Alvars, form the complete universe. The aspects of the advent of the Alvars are furnished for the man to comprehend the fullness and the complexity of the universe. It is only a symbolical and figurative

description of Vishnu, or the universe. To make the matter enjoyable, descriptions and figures of speech are employed making the literature attractive, grand and embellished. But in the enjoyment of literature, the facts or the reality should not be lost.

In the succeeding chapters, we shall be learning the biography and the philosophy of each individual Alvar.

Foot Note : The ideas of Bhakthi and Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, Devotion and universal brotherhood, religion and ethics, surrender - selflessness - service, theism and atheism etc. are elaborately dealt with in my other books, namely, Sriṛamanuja Divya Vaibhavam, Sri Thirumala Thirupati Venkateswara Divya Vaibhavam, The truth of Hinduism (pentagon essays), Sri Bhakthisaramu, and Karma Phala Tyagam (commentary on Geetha), which the reader may study for benefit and better glory of Hinduism.

3. Mudalālvārs

The first three of the twelve Alvars are called in Dravida Prabandhas, Mudalalvars. They are Poyigai Alvar, Pudatthalvar and Peyalvar. Their parentage, places of birth, castes, gothras etc are not traceable.

Taking into account the longer part of their existence in certain particular places, it has been recorded in the Prabandhas that the birth place of Poyigai Alvar was Kanchipuram, that of Pudatthalvar was Mahabalipuram, and that of Peyalvar was Mylapur (in the present Madras city). They were nomadis moving from place to place, from temple to temple praising God in sacred songs and pasuras. They were born some where, moved in so many places of sacred temples and passed away in places untraceable to history.

Poyigai Alvar, as a baby of few days, was found amidst the golden lotus flowers on the verge of the water of the lake or pond near the Vaishnava temple in Kanchipuram. He was born towards the end of Dvapara yuga, in Sravana Nakshathra on Suddha Ashtami day of Alpisi month of Siddhadri year. "Poyigai" means a lake or a pond. As he was found in the lake, he was called Poyigai Alvar. He was also called "Kasara yogi" and "Saromunindra". (Kasara + yogi = Lake + yogi - Saras + Munindra = Lake + Monk). This is the account of his birth as available in Dravida Prabandha. But it is not traceable who his parents were, and in what circumstances the baby might have been abandoned near the lake. The Vaishnava devotees believe that Poyigai Alvar was born in the aspect of Panchajanya, one of Sri Maha Vishnu's Panchayudhas.

The thirunakshatra (time of birth) sloka of Poyigai Alvar :

**Thulāyām sravanījatham kāngchyām kāngchya navārijāth |
Dvāparē pāñchajanyāmsam sarō yōginamāsrāyē ||**



Poyigai Alvar

The very next day, after the advent of Poyigai Alvar, in the Dhanishtha Nakshatra, Pudatthalvar, as a baby, was discovered in a blossoming Adenantha Pavonina Shrub (called Bandi Gurivenda in Telugu) in a garden fence in Mahabalipuram. This is so stated in the Dravida Prabandha. "Bhūtham" means "Soul". As he was a great Paramathma and a wise sage, he was famously called Pudatthalvar. He was also called Bhuthalvar as he had the perfect grasp of knowledge of the Pancha Bhuthas (the five elements) constituting Prapancha or the universe. It is not traceable who his parents were and why the baby was so abandoned in a bush. The Vaishnava devotees believe that he was born in the aspect of Koumodaki, the club or mace

of Sri Vishnu.

The Thirunakshatra slokas of Pudatthalvar :

Thulāśra vishā sambhūtham bhūtham kallola malinaha |
Thirē phullothpalē mallāpuryāmīdē gadamsajam | |

Mallāpura varādhīsam madhavi kusumōdbhavam |
Bhūtham namāmi yō vishnō gnānadeepamakalpayath | |

The latin botanical name, "Adenantha pavonina" is the same as "Bandi gurivenda" in telugu and "Madhavi Kusuma" in sanskrit.

The very next day after the advent of Pudatthalvar, Peyalvar, as a baby, was discovered in Sathabhisha Nakshatra on the bank of Manikairavam, a small pond (Mylapur) in the present Madras City area. The word, Mylapur is the Tamil prabandha that derived from the word, Manikairavam. It is learnt from the baby was found amidst red lotus flowers on



the bank of Manikairavam. Peyalvar is otherwise known by the Tirunamas (sacred names), Mahadahvaya and Mylapuradhipathi. This Alvar was not only Sarva Sanga Parithyagi like the other two Alvars, but also was completely unconscious of the surroundings, and was always moving about and singing to himself in a perfect Vishnu Samslesha Bhava (in an aside). Common people thought in the beginning that he was frantic or mad; that was why he was called Peyalvar. Nothing is traceable about his parentage and the situations forcing his parents to leave him thus on the bank of Manikairavam. The Vaishnava devotees believe that he was born in the aspect of Nandaka, Sri Vishnu's sword.

The Thirunakshatra slokas about Peyalvar :

**“Thulā sathabhishagjātham mayūrapurikairavath |
Mahāntham mahadākhyātham vandē Sri Nandakamsajam” ||**

**“Thulamaha Drishtva thushtā vayo vishnum ramaya
mayiladhipam |
Kūpē rakthōthpalē jātham mahadāhvayamasrayē” ||**

The places, where these three Alvars were found as babies, came to be considered as the places of their births.

These first three Alvars were contemporaries, and they were considered in the prabandhas, Ayonijas or Ayonisambhavas. “Ayonija” means “one who is not born to human parents”. But for all reality it should be understood by “Ayonija” “one whose parentage is not known or not traceable. It should have been that the exact time or lagna, when they were found out as babies and adopted by others



Peyalvar

for protection or bringing up, was considered as the Janma lagna or Janma Nakshatra of the particular Alvar. Or taking into account their accounts of life's fulfilment and their achievements, the astrologers would have fixed up their Janma lagna or Janma Nakshatras.

There is a wonderful story relating to these first three contemporary Alvars, Mudalalvars, Poyigai Alvar. One day, left his cottage (Asramam) of the temple-garden and was going about from village to village,

singing songs and pasuras in praise of God. By Sun-set he reached the outskirts of a village by name Thirukkoyilur. It suddenly became dark, and there was a heavy eyelonic storm. There was a down pour of rain. He saw a small thatched hut just near, and entered it for shelter. Perhaps it was a forlorn hut, deserted by its owner, who would have been charge of fields when there were crops on the fields. The Alvar lay down to sleep in the small narrow space available in the leaky hut. For the Alvar, who believed that every change in nature was due to Vaishnavā Shakthi, every aspect of nature, a breeze or a storm was a pleasurable sight and experience. He was singing in praise of God in melodious tunes to the accompaniment of the continuous and harmonious sound of the blowing of the wind and the falling of rain - "O! Sri Maha Vishnu! your aspects and your deeds are indeed strange and wonderful! It is you that has brought about this chaotic heavy storm, and it is you that has simultaneously shown me this shelter of a hut!"

When the Alvar was thus carrying on with his happy and emotional "Divya Kalyanaguna nama gana" (gana= singing of, nama = names of Divya Kalyanaguna = sacred

and auspicious qualities), another forlorn and helpless person, completely drenched in the rain, still falling heavily with the terrible wind, stood outside the entrance of the hut, and cried aloud, "O, Sir ! will you kindly allow me to take shelter in the hut ?" Poyigai Alvar, who had been all along stretching his body on the ground, suddenly rose up, sat on the ground, and replied from within, "you are welcome, brother ! In the space where one person can lie on the ground, two persons can sit comfortably side by side. Get in soon O, brother ! Don't stay on any further outside in the jet dark and heavy storm." The man shivering with chillness outside, crawled into the hut through the hole-like entrance. Both of them sat in the darkness inside, side by side, touching each other. They could not see each other in the darkness.

While they were thus dozing, and were in a light nap, a third person stood outside in the rain, and shouted aloud in his anxiety for shelter, "O, brothers ! will you kindly allow me to put my head inside just to protect myself from hail ? I can't bear to remain anylonger outside. I am fully drenched in this chill weather." The two, who were within, hearing the voice from outside, stood up and invited him inside with all cooperation and consideration - "O, brother, come in atonce. In the space where only two can sit, three persons can stand. Get in, welcome to thee !" The three just stood leaning slightly on each other, and were getting into a nap soon, as they were terribly tired, just then a fourth person came to the entrance of the hut and requested for shelter.

In fact there was no space for the fourth individual even to stand along with the three. What could they do to help him ? If they should allow him in, one of the three should be prepared to come out into the darkness and rain. Who should go out ? Each wanted to go out to allow the fourth person into the hut, and to make the other two comfortable. All the three began to vie with one another to go out and to seek an opportunity to comfort the rest. No one of the three was less

than the other in selflessness and kindness. Each one tried to go out of the hut, and in so trying, it so happened that all the three came out, rather pushed themselves out, one following the other.

As all the three came out, the fourth person, who was standing outside in the rain and chill weather, said, "O ! kind brothers ! Oh, what a trouble and discomfort you three have courted for my sake ! Oh, I can't choose to be in comfort at the cost of you three. I shall stay outside; I know there is no space for a fourth person to stand inside along with you three. You three, please, get back into the hut. I shall look for another shelter". And he was about to leave them, when all at once, to the wonder of all, nature assumed a wonderful state : What was it ? The cyclone abated suddenly; the rain stopped completely; there was neither a drop of rain from above nor the slightest movement in the leaves of the trees; there was the bright sun-rise; there was no need for anybody to reenter the hut; each of the four began to look at the others in joy and dismay.

Poyigai Alvar, in a fit of joy and surprise, exclaimed aloud in extempore a Tamil pasura, the meaning of which is as follows - "Om namo Narayanaya ! what a wonder is it ! It is as it were that the earth forms the saucer or dish; the ocean, the oil, and the sun is the wick, burning and brightening the whole world. How the rising morning sun makes the world comfortable and bright ! O, Narayana ! you are the sun among the Dvadasadityas (the twelve brightening forces of the universe). Oh, Vishnu : (the omnipresent) Om namo Narayanaya ! I salute to thee in perfect surrender."

The second person similarly began to sing aloud in extempore a Tamil pasura, meaning thus - "O, Swami (The Lord)! with the heat of love, you have melted the butter of my heart. You have lighted the candle of knowledge and wisdom, you have brightened my inner soul. Om namo Narayanaya ! I salute to thee in utter surrender."

The third person began to sing a Tamil pasura thus -
 “O! Purushōtthama! (the supreme life-force) I have understood you and the truth about you. I have attained life's fulfilment. Om namo Narayanaya !”

The fourth person looking at the other three in joy and surprise spoke aloud, “My desire is fulfilled ! I am fortunate! I am blessed ! I have discovered !” And he began to jump and dance in ecstasy.

The first three, who were drawn to the utterance of the fourth man that he had discovered, looked at him in wonder and interrogated him, “what is it that you have discovered ? Please tell us what your discovery is.”

“This is what I have discovered, my dear elder brothers! I have discovered that you three are Alvars ! You are Poyigāi Alvar, born in the aspect of Vishnu's Panchajanya; you are Pudatthalvar of the aspect of Vishnu's Koumodaki; you, brother, you are Peyalvar born in the world in the aspect of Vishnu's Nandaka” - thus saying he began to laugh and dance in joy.

All the other three, who have been hearing all this in a state of equal glee, in one voice unanimously declared, “Brother, we also know who you are ! You are Thirumalisai Alvar, born in this world in the aspect of Sri Maha Vishnu's Sudarsana Chakra”.

Each one of the four said, “I have been wandering all the while from village to village in search of you three.”

All the four Alvars embraced one another and expressed in one voice, “It has been our desire that we, four, should meet together; It has been our endeavour; and this is a wonder and a miracle. But our meeting here is also a natural affair; we are after all four brothers from the same source; we moved out from our places for a natural and auspicious meeting here”. And they were in an ecstasy of joy and satisfaction looking at each other in a brotherly love, regard and respect.

The four Alvars raised their heads to heaven, and in one voice explained, "Om namo Narayanaya ! Oh, Jagajjanaka (the father of the universe)! Your paternal love for four of us is unique. You have indeed created this chaotic storm just to bring us together here, at this sacred place, Thirukkoyilur. May this sacred place ever be remembered by progeny." (Thiru + Koil + ur = The sacred + Temple + Village. Even today Thirukkoyilur is famous as a sacred place in Chengalput district of Tamil Nadu).

The first three Alvars, Mudalalvars, (a detailed account of the fourth Alvar, Thirumalisai Alvar, is furnished in the next following chapter) lived long moving about from place to place, singing sacred Tamil pasuras and songs in praise of the Anantha Kalyana Gunas and the Anantha Kalyana Vibhuthis (aspects of forms) of the omnipresent Srimannarayana. They were ever in Paramanandam (ecstasy of joy) as they were in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava experiencing their association with the auspicious, universal and natural forces. The three Alvars, respectively produced the three sacred Tamil Prabandhas (each one) namely Vijayanthagali, Anbethagali, and Thirukannein, which reveal the truth of universe, its creation and existence, for the spiritual and moral uplift of the man.

Dasarathi (also famous by the name, Mudali Yandan being Sri Ramanuja's first disciple), having studied the Tamil Prabandha, Mudal Thiruvandadi produced by Poyigai Alvar, observed in a pasura thus :

"The eminent poet and merciful benefactor, Sri Poyigai Alvar, who was incarnated amidst the golden lotus flowers of the lake beside the sacred temple of Sri Kanchipuram, famous for its pleasant beautiful and fragrant Caldera gardens (Mogilivana in Telugu), produced for the spiritual and ethical uplift of the humanity the famous Tamil Prabandha, Mudal Thiruvandadi, on enlightening elucidatory treatise, which, being in the spoken Tamil language is easily understandable

to the readers though it contains deep esoteric and divine thoughts.

The emphasis here is that Mudal Thiruvandadi is in Tamil, the spoken language of the people. It must be noted that Mudal Thiruvandadi is the first and the foremost prabandha in Tamil as Rigveda, is the first scripture in Sanskrit. That is why it is called Mudal Thiruvandadi.

As the first Indian scriptures, the Vedas, the Brahma Sutras, the Upanishads and the Geetha were in Sanskrit, the language of the scholars. It so happened that only one community of people studied them and kept their contents secret and unknown to all other communities. It was a doubt, in course of time, how far even that one community people understood them correctly. Hence the Alvars, who were great scholars both in Sanskrit and Tamil and who were selfless having dedicated themselves for the spiritual uplift of humanity in general, and who further wished that all people should understand the Vaishnava Thatthva (what the omnipresent power is - what the universe is), translate the sanskrit scriptures into Tamil, wrote commentaries in Tamil, composed their own philosophical works in Tamil and sang songs, slokas and pasuras both in Sanskrit and Tamil and more in Tamil for the benefit of all people in general.

Common people were more and more attracted by the Alvars, and to their Tamil pasuras which they sang. The writings of the Alvars helped in future centuries (11 and 12th centuries and afterwards) for the propagation of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha by the Munithraya. Sri Nathamuni, who was the founder of Vaishnava Muth in Sreerangam, his grand son, Yamunacharya or Alavandar, who was the founder of the Visishtadvaita Muth in Sreerangam, and Sri Ramanujacharya, who propagated widely the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha, were all enlightened and inspired by the works of the ancient Alvars, became Ubhaya Vedantha Pravarthakas, and honoured both the Sanskrit scriptures and the Tamil

Divya Prabandhas equally, and they carried on their writings both in Sanskrit and in Tamil. They could satisfy and attract both the traditional and conservative class as well as all the other communities.

It has already been observed how Dasarathi described the spiritual eminence of Mudal Thiruvandadi, produced by the first Alvar, Poyigai Alvar. (Mudal = The first. Thiru = Sacred. Vandadi = Hundred) Mudal Thiru Vandadi = The first sacred hundred pasuras = the first Tamil prabandha of the sacred hundred pasuras. Mudal Thiruvandadi (Tamil) = Prathama Divya Satha Sloka Prabandha (Sanskrit).

Now let us taste the sweetness and smell the fragrance of Mudal Thiruvandadi of Poyigai Alvar a little here :

The following is the gist of the first pasura of Mudal Thiruvandadi :

"I offer this garland of the first sacred hundred pasuras to worship and decorate the sacred lotus feet of Lord Vishnu, who is the Lord of all universal wealth with his Sudarsana Chakra in his right hand, created the earth as the saucer, the ocean as the oil and the sun as the brightly burning wick".

The one hundred sacred pasuras are the one hundred flowers of the garland (of sacred literature) offered to the Lord. This is the fine divine composition of this type not only in Tamil, but in all Indian or world literatures. Kulasekaralvar's "Mukundamala" belongs to this type. Later, many religious men of letters produced literature of this type for prayers and worship. Rabindranath Tagore's Geethanjali is also belongs to this type of sacred literature.

The substance of the last the hundredth pasura of Mudal Thiruvandadi is as follows :

"Bear in mind and heart even the Lord Vishnu, the sustaining power of all the universal wealth, who had measured the whole earth with one foot, who is responsible

for creation, existence and distruction, and who ever wears around his neck and over his chest the sacred Thulasi garland. By feeling so, you always keep in mind the two lotus feet of the Lord, one surveyed the earth and the other kicked down Sakatasura".

By the study of the substance of the first and the last pasura of Poyigai Alvar's Mudal Thiruvandadi, we can understand and estimate the literal values such as the eminence of the elegant language and the images employed in the expression and the spiritual values such as the divine discriptions and references to the epics. With this introduction, the readers may develop a taste and an interest to study the whole prabandha separately. The Mudal Thiruvandadi is the other name for Vaiyanthagali.

A Vaishnava Bhaktha had observed the sacredness, importance and greatness of Pudatthalvar's prabandha, Anbedagali, in a pasura like this :

"For the auspicious prospect of deliverance from the sorrowful and complex bonds of family life, I surrender to the sacred and beautiful lotus feet twain of Pudatthalvar, who was born at Thirukkadal Malai noted for its wealth of pearls and natural beauty, and who had produced the divine ambrosia of Anbedagali prabandha.

Pudatthalvar's Anbedagali prabandha is also Thiruvandadi, a book of one hundred divine pasuras (satha Divya Pasura Prabandha). Let us now note the gist of the first pasura of Anbedagali :

"I, the humble and devoted composer of the enlightening and sacred Dravida prabandha, Anbedagali, for the purpose of realising Srimannarayana, the abode of universal soul and the universal knowledge and wisdom, am lighting the bright lamp with devotion as saucer, the earnest aspiration for divine knowledge as ghee, and the purely happiest mind as the wick".

How beautiful, metaphoric and divine the language employed in this pasura is ! What an amount of peace, pleasure and enlightenment, the devoted reader derives here !

Now let us observe the gist of the last or the hundredth pasura of Anbedagali :

"Oh, the omnipresent, the eternal and the incomprehensible ! Oh, Devadeva (the God of gods), Oh, the Lord of the wise, the gods, the sun and the stars ! Oh, Vishnu, wearing the Thulasi garland shining with divine fragrance ! Oh, the destroyer of Kapithhasura and Vatsasura ! Oh, Krishna ! My devotion to Thee is in-estimable ! It is limitless ! And this nature of mine is a wonder even to me, myself".

The Alvar begins the pasura with his devotion to the impersonal omnipresent power and ends with Lord Krishna, the jewel of human beings (Purushottama). The relevance of this trend of thinking about the universal divine power is dealt with in detail, more and more elaborately, in my other books, "Vasthavam - Vyasa-panchakam" (The truth of Hinduism - Pentagon essay) and "SRI Ramanuja Divya Vaibhavam".

A Vaishnava devotee describe the uniqueness of Thirukannein prabandha of Peyalvar thus in a pasura :

"May I happily surrender to the lotus feet of the miraculous Peyalvar of super human powers, who had composed "Thirukannein prabandha" of one hundred pasuras beginning with the sacred word, Thirukannein (Sri Krishna), having worshipped and felt one with the shining blue bodied Sarveswara (The Lord) of Thirukkoyilur, an abode of wealth and happiness and of beautiful and well-constructed houses with beautiful compound walls around".

The following is the gist of the first pasura of Peyalvar's Thirukannein prabandha :

"In the auspicious Archavathara (Idol) of Sarveswara (The over Lord of the universe), blue-complexioned as the deep

ocean, and gloriously shining with the total brightness of innumerable (Suns), I witness with ecstasy Srimahalakshmi" (the goddess of wealth and happiness), the sharp glittering Sudarsana Chakra and the beautiful curled Panchajanya".

The meaning is symbolic of the omnipresent Vaishnava energy and its eternal aspects or forces already dealt with at the outset of this chapter.

The following is the substance of the last or the hundredth pasura of Thirukannein :

"Sri Mahalakshmi, who is ever enamoured of adorning the stout chest of Sri Vishnu with Sudarsana Chakra in his hand and the sacred Thulasi garland round his neck, who is as brilliant as the lightning in the clouded blue sky, whose eyes are as beautiful and wide as the lotus flowers, and who ever dwells in the honeyed fragrant blossoms, is adorable to us all".

The inference from the above pasura is that the divine energy is the omnipresent energy, and when we realise this truth, we get the capacity to realise and to enjoy the beauty and magnificence of each power and aspect of the world or universe. To enjoy such pure and deep pleasure is the Vaishnava feeling.

From the three great divine prabandhas of the first Three Alvars, the divine wisdom which we gather is this: The Alvars believed in, worshipped and enjoyed the universal energy called the Vaishnava Shakthi. They were not blind worshippers of idols; at the same time they did not reject nor dishonour or neglect any divine idol which they happened to witness during their wanderings. As you see the image of a lofty mountain in a mirror, and as you don't consider the image as the real mountain, but as you enjoy the sight of the image in the mirror, the Alvars visualised the omnipresent Vishnu when they saw before them a concrete idol standing as a symbol for the omnipresent energy or

power. They conceived a meaning, a message and a joy etc. in the divine idol; the idol should never be conceived as a bare stone; the book is not merely a bundle of papers; a map is not a scrap of paper; so also an idol.

All the eight Alvars, except the first four Alvars mentioned in this chapter, witnessed and enjoyed the sight of Sriranganatha idol of Srirangam with the feeling of Vaishnava Samslesha Bhava.

The idol of Sreeranganatha of Srirangam, in the Ananthasayana and the Sesha Sayi posture was symbolic of the universe and the universal sustaining power. It was the most perfect idol depicting all aspects and powers of the universe as already observed at the outset in this chapter.

The very sight of the Archavathara (idol) of Sriranganatha inspired the Alvars with the conception of the omnipresence of Vishnu. They were lured into Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, and they began to praise the omnipresent and its aspects in the most pious, enjoyable and figurative Tamil literature. This formed the Dravida Divya Veda (Nalayiram).

The Alvars did not advocate Karma Sannyasa (renunciation from action). They advocated and preached karmaphala Thyaga for the welfare and happiness of the world. Man should lead a righteous life, rendering duties and acts of righteousness with a spirit of surrender - selflessness and service. Man should, with the Vaishnava feeling, render acts of goodness and mercy to his fellowmen in utter surrender to the omnipresent and make his life useful, purposeful, fruitful and serviceable. With this alone he can make Samsara (family) a real Sam+sara. (Sam = good or pleasant. Sara = essence). This is the essence of Alvar's mission of life, its purpose and fulfilment.

The Alvars did not admit the theory of Mithya (unreality). What ever they saw before them was real to them. There

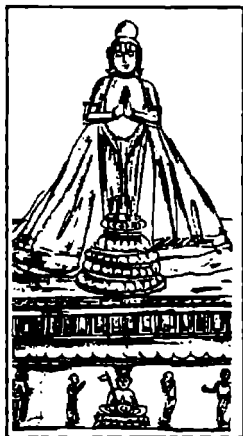
might be change of state for a thing or phenomenon; that change was also real that there was a change. Change should not be considered as unreality (Mithya).

What we see is real; there is so much more of reality beyond what we can see and experience. Our life is short; our energies are limited; with what we see and experience, we should be capable of widening our mental eye and we should try to comprehend the incomprehensible; we should be able to feel astounded at the Vaishnava energy which is limitless in its vastness, in its aspects and in its powers. Hence the human being leads himself to a state of Prapatthi (surrender) to the universal power, of which he is a part, ofcourse a minute part. In this state of Prapatthi, man should experience the Vishnu Samslesha Bhava which is wisdom divine and bliss divine. This type of wisdom-and-bliss is termed as Bhakthi or devotion. It is devotion, with a meaning, a pleasure and a selfless attitude to all creatures in the world.

In this way, the Alvar's way of thinking and living is spiritual (purely wise with an awareness), scientific, psychological, moral, pleasure giving and fruitful. It enmoses peace and happiness of the society and the world. There is no place for superstition, narrow mindedness, selfishness, dogmatic idol worship etc. in the Alvar's way of life.

Thus the Alvar is said to have understood the depth of life, the depth of truth and the depth of bliss. Now, what type of person can understand correctly the Alvar's way of life ? The answer is, the selfless man. The selfless man delivers himself from all bonds or sins, and can enjoy Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. The Alvar's religion is universalism which is the truth. It so happened, that as the Alvars lived and preached in India or Bharath or Hindusthan, the Hindu philosophers consider the Alvars' mission as one of the Hindu or Indian philosophies.

4. Thirumalisai Ālvār



Chronologically, Thirumalisai Alvar was the fourth of the twelve Alvars. His name has been just hinted in the previous chapter on Mudalalvars. The biography of this Alvar lends a feeling of surprise in the minds of readers who are devotees.

Once there was a city by name Thirumalisai. It may be located as a place equidistant to all the three places, Kanchipuram, Mahabali-puram and Mylapur of the present Chengalput district of Tami Nadu, which were the birth places of Mudalalvars. This place, Thirumalisai was otherwise called Mahisara. (Mahi = earth, Sara = fertile, Mahisara = a very fertile place with good crops and good people). This city was famous for its Jagannathaswami Temple, and it was inhabited by people who were pious, virtuous, righteous-minded, duteous, innocent, cooperative and charitable. It was a place of natural beauties and prospects with a pleasant climate, with fine cool streams flowing near on either side, with green fields around, with fruit and flowery groves around, yielding much fruit and blossom, and sights of natural beauties.

That was why this place was often visited by seers, sages, devotees and nomadic Sadhus and Bhikshukas (beggars and mendicants). Gradually Rishikula flourished in the vast beautiful gardens which were pleasant, safe and peaceful. A Rishikula was the abode of a Rishi (sage) with his pupils who were engaged in learning the scriptures from their Guru, the Rishi.

It so happened that in course of time, a sage by name Bhargavi came there with his consort and established his temporary abode (Parnasala = A shed made of leafy branches) in a mango grove. Ofcourse Bhargavi was a Brahmin by caste; but the parentage, the caste and other details regarding his lady were suspected, and there were illfounded rumours among the other Gurukulas there. In course of time Kanakangi, the consort of sage Bhargavi, became pregnant and in due time she delivered of a son. The new born baby did not cry immediately after birth and for sometime further. The parents suspected the loss of life to the baby. They concluded it was a still born baby, after testing it well. Some how they did not even announce anything to others about the delivery of the baby. They abandoned the baby in a cane bush during the night, and they left the place atonce and to where nobody could know.

The next morning the baby in the cane bush began to cry aloud, and it was heard by a man, named Thiruvadan, belonging to Medara caste (Basket makers' caste), who had gone to that spot for gathering canes. He rushed to the spot, saw the baby amidst the cane bushes, took the baby into his hands in kindness, sympathy and affection and hurried to his home. His wife, Padnavalli, who was a barren or childless woman, received the child with a motherly love and began to look after the baby as a mother would. But it so happened that the baby never sucked the mother's breast, nor drank any milk or liquid which the mother gently poured into the baby's mouth with a spoon. It was a wonder to the foster-parents and all the neighbours. But the baby was healthy and was having a quik growth of physique. It was indeed a freak of nature and had no reason or logic about it.

People thronged to see this wonderful baby, who was flourishing well not with food and drink, but with air and an inexplicable divine power. (What is beyond the comprehension of man is generally termed Divine). There

are certain beings in this world, which we might not come across in our actual experience, that live upon air. A study of geography and animal life will reveal certain freaks of nature. This baby was considered to have a digestive-system of this kind in a human form. Even now there are some rare examples of this kind among the human beings, which need not be cited individually.

This particular baby was unique in his bright quick looks, smiles and quick movements. Even as a baby he looked like a genius and a sage. The physical and mental growth of the baby were abnormally wonderful. The disposition of the baby was that of a saint. Even as a baby he appeared to key about and contemplative; he would be looking at his surroundings for a moment thoughtfully; he would then sit with closed eyes as a sage. Though the baby was not taking any food or drink, the parents gave him regular bath and washed clothes. He was decorated with flowers on the head and around the neck, with a fine thilak mark on the face alone with other cosmetics and fragrant materials.

The boy was beautiful, strong, energetic and bright. He was "Divya Sundara Vighraha Mūrty". (Divya = Divine, Sundara = Beautiful, Vighraha Mūrty = Personifications, a concrete form). The parents were very happy about him. He was always singing most melodiously songs in praise of Lord Vishnu. The singing of songs in praise of God itself was all the food and water for him. Sometimes he appeared unconscious, and was smiling at such moments. He was really in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. He was in communion with the universal sustaining power. People from far and near thronged to see him. His abode, rather the home of his foster parents, became a sacred centre of pilgrimage for people of that region. He was considered by all people as an Alvar. Because he was in Thirumalisai city, he came to be famously called Thirumalisai Alvar.

There was a particular Sudra gentleman of a humble living in that place, who was childless. Having known a great

deal about the boy Alvar, he somehow felt in his mind that he would have a son with the blessings of the boy Alvar. One day he came to the boy Alvar with his wife, put a cup of milk at the sacred feet of the Alvar. They then fell flat at his feet in utter surrender and prayed to the Alvar to drink the milk. All the people there looked in wonder at this scene. They began to wonder how the sudra couple expected the boy Alvar to drink milk then, while he had not touched a bit of food or a drop of water so far since his birth. But as the couple continued their prostration at his feet, the boy Alvar, as a freak in his behaviour, suddenly took into his hands the cup of milk, drank half the milk, and returned the rest to the sudra couple, who together drank the rest of the milk with all faith and devotion. The Sudra lady became pregnant soon and in due time gave birth to a son whom the parents named kanikannan. This was again a wonder about the miracles and mysteries of the boy Alvar, Thirumalisai Alvar.

By the time Kanikannan came to the age of twelve, Thirumalisai Alvar was about 25 years old, who was then famous as a great Alvar with miraculous and mystical powers. Many people were his devotees and everyday there were streams of visitors to see him and to receive his blessings. It so happened that the twelve years boy Kanikannan was received by Thirumalisai Alvar as his disciple. Both of them left their homes and made the Jagannatha swami Temple garden their abode. This was a strange couple of an Alvar and his disciple, a Guru and a Sishya, a preceptor and a follower, a teacher and a student. They together led divine lives of devotion and pleasure in the garden, singing songs in praise of Lord Vishnu, the omnipresent power. The Alvar and his disciple were great men of erudition and composed songs and sang extempore in praise of God in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, Kanikannan would compose songs in praise of Thirumalisai Alvar and he would sing them melodiously. Even the bees, the butterflies and the birds were drawn to their music. The

garden was humming with divine music of their songs and it was sweet smelling with the fragrance of their devotion. Thus Thirumalisai came to be considered as a place of divinity and of pilgrimage. The alternative name of this place, Mahisara got strengthened on account of the Alvar whose presence made the place important and famous.

Every Alvar was a "Swāchārya", and Thirumalisai Alvar was also so. "Swāchārya" means "a teacher to himself". The Alvars did not have any external teacher, their conscience was their teacher; their self-awareness was their teacher; their experience was their teacher. The term, "Swāchārya" may appear strange to a common man. If the creator is responsible for all creation, who is responsible for the creator? How do you conceive of the term, Ādimadhyāntharahitha ? (one without a beginning, a middle and an end ?) (Adi = Beginning or origin, Madhya = Middle, Antha = End, Rahitha = Not having). "The Alvar being a Swacharya" should be understood thus. While Thirumalisai Alvar was a Swacharya, his disciple, Kanikannan was Ekasanthagrahi. (Ēkasanthāgrāhi is one who is able to recite or reproduce any literal work by one reading or hearing). Swāchārya and Ēkasanthāgrāhi are also freaks of nature. For example any scientist, who is a discoverer or an inventor is a freak of nature. This is a wonderful aspect of nature which is beyond the comprehension of ordinary people like ourselves.

The Vaishnava devotees believe that Thirumalisai Alvar was born in the aspect of Sudarsana Chakra of Lord Vishnu. "Sri Bhakthisara Muni" and "Mahisarapuradhisa" are the other names by which he is called in Prabandhas.

The Thirunakshatra Thaniyan (The Sanskrit sloka about the time of birth) of the Alvar is worth mentioning here :

**"Makhāyām makarē māsē chakrāmsam bhārgavōdbhavam |
Mahīsāra purādhīsam bhakthisāramaham bhajē ||**

Substance : "May I sing in praise of Thirumalisai Alvar, the son of sage Bhargavi; also called Mahîsâra-purâdhî sa, and Bhakthisâra Muni, who was born in the aspect of Sri Vishnu's Sudarsana Chakra, in Makâra Lagna of Makha Nakshatra".

The life of Thirumalisai Alvar was throughout glorious with miracles and mysteries. One day the Alvar was walking from the garden to the Jagannâtha temple. On the way, he happened to see a maiden, bent with illness and weakness with an old emaciated wrinkled face, suffering from bodily pains and walking slowly along the road. The kind Alvar took pity on her, and putting his hand gently on her unolted head blessed her and whispherd a few words in her ears. Perhaps it was an advice for a medical treatment with a herb or an instruction, philosophical and divine. But whatever it was, it so happened that the young maiden, in a few days, was wonderfully transformed into a most beautiful and healthiest maiden bubbling with youthfulness and vigour.

One evening the king of Thirumalisai was proceeding to the garden in a palanquin. He was a young prince yet to be married. He espied suddenly from his palanquin this young and voluptuous maiden walking on the road. He was struck with her fascinating beauty and her cultivated sweet tongue. Without ascertaining her parentage, caste or any other details he accepted to take her as his queen. (Love is blind; the first love has no barriers). It could not be estimated or described what her joy and wonder were on the occasion of her suddenly becoming the queen from the deplorable state of a beggar maid, and how thankful she might have felt towards the Alvar whose divine touch was the cause of her health, beauty, wealth, position and splendour.

Another greater wonder and miracle was that, as age advanced, there were signs of old age in the king, but the queen remained youthful, beautiful and vigorous as ever. There was no change in her physique or complexion. Even in her middle age she appeared like a youthful maiden, as

youthful as on her wedding day when the king had his first glance on her. This was a great and growing wonder to the king as well as to all the people of the palace and of the city. It so happened that the king was forced to ask her, "My dear queen, how is it that you remain ever youthful even as age advances?" The queen replied with pleasure and a sense of devotion, "This is all due to the blessings of Thirumalisai Alvar." She narrated to the king the story of her obtaining blessings from the Alvar years ago, when she was a young girl. The king was much amused at her wonderful narration.

Soon the king summoned Kanikannan to his darbar. The king ordered, "Kanikannan, I have something to speak to your Guru, Thirumalisai Alvar. Get him here at once". He replied to the king, "Oh, King ! It is not possible to get my Guru here. He is a great devotee and he exults himself in divine joy. He is almost to himself and aside to his surroundings. His food and drink, his work and pastime, his sleep and wakefulness, all were his devotional singing in praise of Sri Vishnu. Often he is unconcious in his bliss. He is not alive to the calls of the surroundings. So it is not possible to get him here. If your majesty wants to see him, your majesty may kindly see him at his hermitage, in the temple garden".

The king was displeased with Kanikannan's reply. "That is all right; keep it aside for the present. I have heard that you are also a Bhaktha and that you compose beautiful songs, which you sing sonorously, you now compose some songs extempore here and sing them to me." Kanikannan replied in a gentle voice and in all humility and courtesy, "Oh, King! It is a fact that I can compose songs myself and sing them melodiously. But let me submit to your majesty that all my compositions and all my singings are only about my revered Guru, Thirumalisai Alvar, and about no body else. The Alvar is my Guru, my God, my Lord and my ruler." The king became wild with anger and said, "you and your Guru shall at once leave this city and live elsewhere. Both of you are

banished from the capital city. You both are disloyal to the king. You have no respect even to your ruler and protector. You have no place here. You don't deserve to be in my capital city any longer. Get away at once. I don't like to see your faces !" Silence prevailed in the royal court.

Kanikannan, without uttering a single word, walked out of the palace, reached Jagannatha Temple garden and gently informed the Alvar about the king's merciless order. The Alvar, who was a Bhagavan (one who could receive any thing with equanimity) smiled, rose up and began walk out into the street. Kanikannan silently followed the Alvar. The citizens came to know about the cruel order of the king. They felt sorry for the pride of the king and the dishonour caused to the Alvar. The people could not bear their separation from the Alvar who had been a source of happiness, devotion and welfare of the people and the city. So all the people, men, women and children left their homes and began following the Alvar and his disciple in a large flowing crowd. They wanted to settle down where the Alvar would stay. They all reached the outskirts of the city silently and contemplatively.

As the Alvar lived in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, and felt himself one with all creation and the creator, the surprise was that all the domestic animals of the city and all the birds perching in the trees, in the city and all the birds hovering over the city then, also followed the people from out of the town. (It was all like the pied piper of Hammelin!). It was all the mystery of the Vishnu Samslesha Bhava of the Alvar. There was the unknown mutual bonds between Alvar's soul and all other souls. But perfect silence prevailed even among the moving crowds of people, animals and birds. Perhaps the people felt that the Alvar would be kind enough to understand their abiding attachment to him and might comply with their request to return to his temple garden abode, failing which perhaps they wanted to establish their

habitations at a place where the Alvar was going to settle down. They were not bold enough to express their minds to the Alvar, for the Alvar had always been their silent well-wisher; he was never in the habit of conversing with others. The Alvar was innocent, virtuous and he was their spiritual treasure. All the people were walking behind the Alvar in silence and with their heads bent. The people who were such devotees, in their anxiety and belief, felt as if God Jagannatha of their city's temple left the temple and was following them.

The king and the queen were the only two solitary beings in the palace or in the whole town. The queen had come to know all this only then. She brought home to the mind of the king his blunder and his inability to understand the divinity and the glory of the Alvar. The king realised his fault and became bewildered at the strange and awful and woeful consequences of his pride, arrogance and stupidity. Followed by the queen, he ran and ran in utter bewilderment while tears were rolling down from his eyes. He reached the Alvar, prostrated himself at his feet and begged for pardon. The kind and generous Alvar raised the king by his shoulders gently and blessed him with his profuse smiles. Soon all people with the Alvar walked back to their homes in awful silence and reverence. The Alvar reached his garden abode along with his disciple. The whole city was silent in deep contemplation : It was like the stillness after the storm. From that time onwards the king became a devotee of the Alvar and he used to pay a visit every night, with the queen, to the Alvar and Jagannatha Swami of the temple. All the people including the king felt that the Alvar's Mangalasasanams (blessings) were ever for their safety, peace and prosperity.

Thirumalisai Alvar produced a famous Prabandha in Tamil, by name Nanmugan, which was also Thiruvandadi (Satha Divya Pasura Prabandha or Divya Satha Sloki = A book of one hundred sacred pasuras).

A Vaishnava devotee wrote a pasura in praise of Thirumalisai Alvar, the gist of which is the following :

“Sreemannarayana created Chathurmukha Brahma, and Rudra, the violent and the powerful was born to Brahma. The truth of this knowledge is contained in the Divya Prabandha (sacred book) by name Nanmugan, a beautiful, figurative and elegant composition, produced by Thirumalisai Alvar. The divine knowledge contained in this Divya Prabandha subsists the reader in his philosophic and righteous life. My benedictions are here for the lotus feet of the Alvar of Thirumalisai or Mahisara noted for productive and fragrant gardens”.

(An explanation : What is the divine truth contained in the statement, “Sreemannarayana created Chathur-mukha Brahma, to whom the violent and powerful Rudra was born”. — “Sreemannarayana stands for the omnipresent energy (Vaishnava Shakthi).

Creation or life emanated through creatures and vegetation around, on all the four sides, everywhere.

This creation is rampant, quickly spreading, continuous, violent and powerful”.

This is the truth of the universe given in the Tamil Prabandha, Nanmugan.

Let us now enjoy the Divya Sourabha (Divine fragrance) of Nanmugan Prabandha by the study of the first and the last pasuras, which shall serve as an introduction to the study of the entire Prabandha :

The following is the gist of the first pasura :

“Sriyahpathi (The universal Lord of all the universal wealth) created Brahma (creator). Brahma in turn created Rudra(The violent, the vast and the powerful force). I, the humble devotee (of the universal truth) am establishing this truth in my prabandha, Nanmugan. You should study this

Prabandha correctly, properly and cleverly and grasp the eternal and universal truth".

The Alvar here cautions the reader against dogmatic, superstitious and superficial reading of any scripture. The purpose of reading any scripture is to grasp its true gist in a scientific way and to mind our lives accordingly and to make our lives meaningful, purposeful and fruitful. The baits for study of a scripture, that the mere reading of the scripture or a part of it gives you wealth, health, children etc. and heaven after death, are all meaningless and false. The Alvar is against the so called "Phala Sthuthi" (describing the results of mere reading). If one reads and understands a scripture, the "phala" (result) is that he leads a good and useful life, useful to himself and to fellow-beings. This is a revolution against the meaningless and dogmatic traditional method of using the scripture. The Alvars' way of life itself corrects all dogmation. (The Vishnu Samslesha Bhava of the Alvars, described already, should be properly understood by the people to make their lives happy).

"The divine energy or power is Adimadhyantha-rahita (without a beginning, a middle and an end). In this are combined the three powers, creation, protection and destruction. This combined universal energy is said to be Vaishnava Shakthi (The omnipresent energy). And this energy is incomprehensible" - This is the idea that is made clear by the Alvar in the first pasura of Nanmugan.

The following is the substance of the last pasura of Nanmugan :

"O, my Lord ! I have now learnt that you are the God of gods, that you are the source of all this universe, and that you are everything, all the materials and energies so far known to me and those yet to be known. I have clearly understood that you are super-human and you are the soul energy (Athma) in all creatures, Oh, Sreemannarayana !"

The reader will understand how lofty and magnanimous, how logical and reasonable, how real and scientific the idea expressed in the pasura is ! - The Vaishnava Shakthi (The omnipresent energy) is Avagmanasagochara Shakthi (a power beyond comprehension, beyond expression and beyond the five senses). It is the source of the soul of every creature; it is all pervading; it is without a beginning, a middle and an end; It is truth; it is eternity; it is what enables feeling and action anywhere; It is Charāchara (The moving and the non moving; the life and the matter). Hence man's essential characteristic shall be surrender - selflessness (Prapatthi - Swartharahitha). A life of surrender - selflessness leads to a life of service : It is happiness and life's fulfilment. Man's primary duty is to be cooperative with and to be helpful to fellow-beings. Karma Sannyāsam (renunciation from action) is improper and it is not advocated in Geetha; rather it is condemned. The Karma Sannyāsi (one who has abandoned all duties and all actions) is neither useful to himself nor to others; he is an idler; he is a dependent on others (a hanger on). "His life is fruitful who aids so many others to live". It is Karmaphala Thyāga (renouncing the fruit of action for the benefit of others) that helps peace, development and welfare. Man should be duteous; he must incessantly pursue righteous action; Good thinking, good speech, good deed, and above all Karmaphala Thyaga are possible only for him who believes in the omnipresence of God, and who lives in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. Such a blessed person is ever in bliss; he aids and cooperates with Jagathkalyāna (the welfare of the universe). This is the message of Thirumalisai Alvar; This is the common message of all Alvars; this is the Alvar's way of life, and this is the substance of Bhagavad Geetha.

It was the Alvar's way of life-and-mission that gave rise to Thatthva Thrayagnana in the mind of Ramanuja, and the Visishtadvaithic mission of surrender - selflessness-service. (The term, Thatthva Thraya gnana, has already been explained in the previous two chapters).



5. Kulasēkharālvār



Kulasekharalvar was at first a King. He was the son of King Dhridhavratha of Chandravamsa dynasty of Kerala Desa. He was born at Kollipattana (Chola pattana) in Keraladesa on Friday, the tenth day after full moon, in the month of Masi of the year, Parabhava. The Vaishnava devotees believe, as per the Tamil Prabandhas, that Kulasekharalvar was born in the aspect of Kousthubha Mani, worn by Lord Vishnu on his chest.

The following is the Thirunakshatra sloka pertaining to the birth of Kulasekharalvar :

**“Kumbhē punarvasou jātham
Keralē chōlapattanē |
Kousthubhāmsam dharādhisam
Kulasēkhara masrayē” ||**

Substance : “I salute to Kulasekhara, the king of Keraladesa with Chalapattana as capital, born in Punarvasu Nakshathra lagna of Kumbha Rasi, in the aspect of Kousthubha Mani, worn by Lord Sri Mahavishnu on his chest”.

Kulasekhara was a powerful emperor with a mighty military force of Chathurangabala. (Chathur + Anga + Bala = four + diverous + military force = The mighty military force consisting of Ratha (chariots), Gaja (elephants), Thuraga = horses, and Padathi (infantry). he had conquered all the neighbouring kings and was the sole absolute emperor in all Keraladesa. He was such a monarch of lofty ideals, mercy and generosity that he kept all the vasal rulers under his grip and did not allow any stronger vasal King to tease the neighbouring vasal ruler of inferior strength. There was perfect peace and amity all over the Keraladesa during the

reign of King Kulasekhar. Though he was kind and just, he assumed and enjoyed a feeling of absolute superiority, dictatorship; and was consciousness of superior power and authority. It was, ofcourse, natural in such circumstances, that he shone like the powerful sun in the vast sky, or like the moon amidst the innumerable twinkling stars in heaven.

In course of time, as a result of friendship and company with devoted and pious scholars of scriptures, out of personal experience with men and matters and out of a sublimation of his natural goodness, King Kulasekhar acquired the Vaishnava Bhava (the divine knowledge of the omnipresent power). He began to worship and admire Sreemannarayana as the Supreme Lord of universal wealth, all-pervading force through the Chith (live) and Achith (lifeless or physical matter) and the creator and protector of the universal. As a result, he was rid of Rajasa (pride) and Thamasa (selfishness) gunas (qualities), and was an embodiment of Sathvaguna (purely virtuous quality). He carried on the administration of his government to the satisfaction, appreciation and admiration of all sections of the people of Kerala.

King Kulasekhara closely found around him in nature and mentally conceived of, the five aspects of the divinity (the Vaishnava or the omnipresent power), namely, Svasvarupa or Svarupa (identification of oneself with the divinity), Rupa (comprehending the divinity), Guna (the innumerable good qualities), Vibhava (the splendour of nature around) and Vibhuthi (the different innumerable forms in creation said to be containing the omnipresent energy); fortunately, as a result, the divine knowledge of universal love dawned on him. He was a sage-King (Raja Rishi) like Janaka Maharaja of ancient times, and he was in fact a jewel among Kings. Besides, Kulasekhara was a great scholar and an eminent poet.

It was to his deep contemplation that King Kulasekhara could observe that the family men (Grihasthas) in general

due to of lack of 'the knowledge of the self' (Athma gnana), with a wrong conception that physical comforts were the goal of life, having a completely forgotten about the divinity (the eternal Vaishnava energy), pursuing wrong pleasures out of ignorance etc, were in a most distressing situation of having lost the Joy-eternal (Paramanandam); he hence disliked his royal pleasures, his royal life and his royal splendour of processions in howdahs on the elephant's back.

Like Vibhishana (of the epic of Ramayana) who renounced everything, his wife, his children, his kith and kin, his relations and companions, his country, his pleasures, his treasures etc. and surrendered to the lotus-feet of Sree Rama (Raghuramaraja), consistent with the path (upaya) enunciated in Geetha Charama Sloka, (*Sarva dharman parithyajya Mamekam Saranam Vraja*), King Kulasekhara renounced all pleasures and comforts of worldliness, and decided to go to Sreerangam, where he wanted to spend the rest of his life worshipping Anathasayana or Sreeranganatha in Sreerangam Temple, and living in the company of the Vaishnava devotees there. He was planning for a proper time or day for his pilgrimage to Sreerangam.

The first sloka of Mukunda Mala Prabandha, which is an introduction to the regular contents of the Prabandha running from the second sloka, states, "*I sincerely bow to King Kulasekhara, with salutations, whose capital city echoes and re-echoes daily with the musical sounds of processions of pilgrims bound to Holy Srirangam*".

King Kulasekhara had an intense desire to visit Thiruvengadam (Thirumala), where the Swami Pushkarini pond was considered by devotees more sacred than the Holy Ganges river, where many great sages dwelt worshipping the Lord and making penance, and where he (Kulasekhara) preferred to exist even as an animal, a bird or a tree to living elsewhere as a human being.

He further intended to visit all holy shrines of Bharath (The one hundred and eight Divya Thirupatis or divine sacred places).

King Kulasekhara had chosen to spend all his wakeful hours in listening to the reading by pious pandit-devotees, the great epic Ramayana, which was famous as the first and the greatest epic of devotion, and which contained the sacred story of Prince of Rama of Ayodhya, the son of Dasaratha; further Ramayana was considered to have described Sri Rama as an embodiment of all divine qualities of the Supreme Being described in Vedas and Upanishads; it was also considered to contain the wisdom celestial.

King Kulasekhara loved and adored equally both Sri Rama and Sri Krishna, the epic heroes of Ramayana and Maha Bhagavatha respectively; both of them were incarnations of the triple divine qualities of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. Sri Rama and Sri Krishna were the two banks of the sacred river of wisdom celestial. This rare water of this sacred river is a compound of the oxygen of knowledge-cum-wisdom and the hydrogen of exemplary life. (Two parts of Hydrogen combines with one part of oxygen and forms water).

One day while Kulasekhara was listening to the reading of Ramayana, a strange incident happened ! He heard the following sloka from the Yuddha Kanda of the epic :

**Chathurdasa sahasrāni
Rakshasām bhīmakarmānam |
Ekaśca Rāmō dharmāthmā
Katham yuddham bhaviśhyathi ||**

Substance : "The battle is between fourteen thousand strong, and terrible Rakshasas on one side, and on the other side the lonely Sri Rama, the incarnation of Dharma (Justice and Duty)! Oh ! What a result that will be !"

Poet Valmiki expresses his fears and apprehensions about the success of Sri Rama, the Dharmathma !

Grasping the meaning of the sloka, King Kulasekhara, who was devoted to Sri Rama, with his feeling of sympathy and one-ness with Sri Rama (ie. with his Rama-Samslesha Bhava), felt deeply for the helpness and oneliness of Sri Rama and feared danger to Sri Rama. He immediately started with all his military forces (Chathurangabalas) and was proceeding towards the direction of the sea to help Sri Rama in his terrible fight with Ravana and the innumerable Rakshasas.

Understanding the delusion of the King out of his emotional devotion to Sri Rama, the wise and sympathetic ministers at once thought of a plan to rescue the King from his emotional excesses. What was the plan ? As per the instructions of the ministers, a small battalian of soldiers who had gone by another route and met the King on the way announcing, "The divine Sri Rama killed all the fourteen thousand Rakshasas in the battle and turned back to Ayodhya". Hearing this, King Kulasekhara felt happy and satisfied, and returned to his palace. Such was the devotion and Vaishnava Samslesha Bhava of the King.

Later the ministers sat together at a conference and began to think deeply as to how to bring back their King to normal mental position. They said, "The delusion of our King is due to his continued association with the Vaishnava devotees. If this continues, in course of time, the King may turn completely unworldly in his madness for devotion. His philosophical madness will affect mental health of the King. It is quite necessary to make a plan somehow to thwart the King from his excessive devotion and from the company of the Vaishnava Bhakthas". They soon implemented their plan secretly :

One day the ministers secretly removed the Navarathna-studded Aparanji gold necklace from the Sri Krishna Idol installed in the hall of worship and prayer of the royal palace. (Navarathna = The nine types of precious stones used in

ornaments. Aparanji = pure gold). The King was used to spend considerable time in the morning and at night in worship and prayer daily in neatly kept hall, attended by the Vaishnava devotees were the companions of the pious King. The ministers then spread a wild rumour that the Vaishnava devotees, who were always with the King in the prayer hall, and who used to frequent the worship hall usually even in the King's absence, might have stolen the ornament.

The King was much distressed at this unfair allegation against the Vaishnava devotees, who were to him as dear as God Himself. He sternly and openly condemned the allegation and swore that he would pooh-pooh the allegation : He immediately ordered the narrow-necked bamboo basket to be brought to him by the snake charmer; there was a terrible cobra in it. The King suddenly opened the lid of the basket and pushed his hand into the basket wearing that the snake would bite him only if the Vaishnava devotees were guilty. He successfully removed his hand from the basket unhurt and declared with joy and to the bewilderment of all that the Sri Vaishnava devotees would never commit mean acts! The ministers who were at the bottom of the strategy were filled with fear and astonishment, fell on the feet of the King for their wicked and foolish plan, and returned the golden ornament of the Sri Krishna idol. They requested the King to forgive them and expressed that they had planned the strategy with all good intentions.

From this incident onwards, King Kulasekhara disliked to live amongst people who were ungodly. he soon made his two sons rulers of his empire, which he divided into two equal parts, each to be ruled by one son. He advised his two sons to rule the Kingdoms with the welfare of the people in view. He had lost his queen long ago; he renounced all worldly life. (He became Sarva Sanga Parithiyagi). He reached Srirangam with a band of his Vaishnava friends, worshipped, praised and felt himself one with his Vaishnava

Samslesha Bhava, with Lord Ranganatha idol, which he felt as the symbolic representation of the universe and the universal sustaining power (The Vaishnava Sakthi). With this divine and emotional joy and realisation, he produced two sacred Prabandhas (books on devotion and godliness), Mukunda Mala in Sanskrit and Perumal Thirumoli in Tamil, for the benefit of the humanity to learn and experience the splendour of the Supreme Power responsible for all creation, existence and distruction. He served the humanity thus in the service of the Lord, and achieved his life's fulfilment.

King Kulasekhara considered Lord Krishna, the Geethacharya, as the supreme being with the three qualities of Truth, Beauty and Goodness (The Thribhuvana Sundara) and produced Mukunda Mala of forty Sanskrit slokas, in praise of Sri Krishna. This Prabandha of forty slokas is famous not only for its devotional aspect, but also for its literary of Lord.

Kulasekhara imagined himself to be Dasaratha Maharaja, and in his divine emotion (Samslesha Bhava) loved Sri Rama as his son, and produced a Tamil Prabandha by name Perumal Thirumoli praising the beauty, the goodness and the truthfulness of Sri Rama in an equisite style and feeling.

The Vaishnava devotees consider both these books highly enlightening and sacred.

I have in detail explained the meaning, significance and implications of each of the forty slokas of Mukunda Mala in a separate production of mine by name Sri Bhakthi Saramu. As this is a book containing the biographies in brief of the twelve Alvars, only the thread of philosophy runs through them. It is not here possible to give a full account of the writings of the Alvars.

It is usual in Ayurveda Medical Science that for healthy long life and to be free from persistent and chronic diseases, a medical treatment with proper dosage of a prescribed patent medicine is advised by the doctor for a full period of

40 days (called Mandalam), after which the patient is expected to be cured completely. So also a devotee who grasps the meaning in full of all the forty slokas of Mukunda Mala is expected to be free from all doubts of spiritual knowledge and becomes really wise and fully enlightened. He will understand what the Vaishnava Shakthi (omnipresent power or energy) is. He will realise that he is a speck of the universal soul power (Vaishnavamsam). He becomes eligible to understand the wisdom of the Thatthva Thraya Gnana propounded in Visishtadvaita Siddhantha.

Kulasekhara had offered to Lord Sri Krishna the literary garland of 40 slokas and achieved what he had desired. He was considered to be a Supreme Vaishnava devotee and was popularly called Kulasekhara Alvar.

I am here-under furnishing three slokas from Mukundamala just for the appreciation of it for the reader. With the assistance of this little introductory explanation, the reader will surely grasp the true taste of the Prabandha, and he will be tempted in course of time to read and fully understand the entire Prabandha of 40 slokas :

(1) The Sanskrit sloka, transliterated into English :

Sathrucchēdaika manthram, sakalamupanishadvākya

sampujya manthram

**Samsārōthhāra manthram, samupachithathamassanga niryāna
manthram |**

Sarvaisvaryaika manthram, vyasanabhujagasandashta

santhrāna manthram

Jihvē ! Sri Krishna manthram, japa japa sathatham, janma

sāphalya manthram || (No. 23)

Substance : "Sri Krishna manthra destroys all your enemies. It is the manthra worshipped by all the Upanishads; it is the manthra that redeems you from the Samsara (The family worries); it is the manthra that dispels the dense darkness of ignorance; it is the manthra that grants you all

prosperities and comforts; it is the manthra that protects you from the bite of the terrible cobras of evil temptations; it is in short the supreme manthra that makes life purposeful and fruitful. Hence O, tongue ! utter always the sacred Sri Krishna Manthra". (Manthra = mystical spell).

A brief commentary on the substance of the sloka :

Understanding the "sloka" to the extent as given under substance is not enough; it would be like food not chewed well, which not only hinders assimilation but causes the disease of indigestion. Similarly, when you don't learn the truth in full, it brings about two disadvantages : one is the continued ignorance; the other is the pride of having known it. Half knowledge is dangerous : One should always bear this truth in mind, particularly student of any science or philosophy. Ignorance ofcourse, does not tend a person to be humble; on the other hand it develops a sense of wrong pride.

What is meant by "Sri Krishna manthra"? It does not mean "uttering the name of Sri Krishna on and oft or always". It is not repeating the word, "Sri Krishna" innumerable times in undertone which is called "Japam" in Sanskrit, the practice of the so called sages in penance; it is again not singing aloud the word, "Sri Krishna" repeatedly in a musical voice to the accompaniment of musical instruments, singly or in chorus, which is called "Bhajan" in Sanskrit.

By the term Sri Krishna Manthra, is meant "The Bhagavad Geetha" given by Lord Sri Krishna.

It is a series of "manthras" or "instructions for life". The manthras or instructions in "Geetha" relate to ethical and spiritual life of a person. And the last and the most important instruction in Geetha is called "Charama Sloka (last sloka) or Thirumanthra (the most important or the most sacred instruction or direction for life)". The following is the charama sloka containing the Thirumanthra :

**Sarva dharmān parithyajya māmēkam saranam vraja |
Aham thvā sarva pāpēbhyō mōkshayishyāmi māsuchaha ||**

This is the most sacred manthra (Thiru Manthra). This is the manthra or advice to be followed for the fulfilment of life's purpose. (Janma Saphalya Manthram). This manthra advocates the attitude of "Surrender" - surrender to the omnipresent Vaishnava power or divine power. The attitude of surrender leads a person to the spirit of "selflessness". It is true that a selfless man has no cause for fear or bondage, or evil temptation. This is Sri Krishna manthram, the instruction of Lord Krishna to humanity. This is for the cultivation of the spirit of selflessness, which leads to the spirit of social service. Thus this is "Sri Krishna manthra" for "Janma Saaphalya".

Sri Krishna manthra or Thiru manthra is the destroyer of man's enemies. Man's enemies in this world are six in number - Arishadvarga = six enemies - They are Kama (lustful desire), Krodha (burning anger or wrath), Lobha (miserliness tinged with avarice), Moha, Mada (pride or arrogance) and Matsarya (envy and jealousy). How can a selfless man have enemies ?

The Geetha is said to be the essence of all the Upanishads. And the essence of that essence is the Charama śloka advocating surrender and selflessness. Hence the Charama śloka or Sri Krishna manthra is said to be worshipped by all the Upanishads. It is the wisdom Supreme.

The family man is generally stuck up in the mire of many problems of the family. Normally he is selfish and is concerned only with the well-being of his family and his family members even at the cost of others sufferings. He is tempted to commit any sin for the gains of his family. He becomes a victim to evil qualities of selfishness, partiality, envy, jealousy, greed etc. As the family man is generally prone to be selfish and selfcentred, he is amenable for so many evil ways and undesirable behaviour. For due to the influence of a unique family gentleman, who has cultivated the spirit of

selflessness, the family life is really enjoyable and may be beneficial to others out of his spirit of social service. Samsara really becomes Sam + sara for him (sam = good, sara = enjoyable essence or juice). Such a selfless person remains and shines in his family life uninfluenced by any evil temptations; he is like a drop of water, shining like a pearl though touching but unaffected the leaf on which it remains. As Sri Krishna manthra advocates the spirit of surrender and selflessness, it certainly redeems the family man from the family tangles.

True knowledge and wisdom are possible only for one who is not selfish. It is only a selfless man that has got a straight path for his life; he does not seek crooked ways. He is not a victim to any evil temptations. Hence Sri Krishna manthra dispels the darkness of ignorance; ignorance is the curse of the selfish wretch.

Who is it that can enjoy all prosperity and happiness? The selfless man - the man without desires. It is really the man sans desires that enjoys contentment. A man of contentment is a man of riches. On the other hand he is really a beggar who, having much property, is still greedy and ambitious. A man of greed is the man of misery. The selfless man is free from Saptha Vyasanas (the seven evil temptations) and the Arishadvarga (the six enemies). As Sri Krishna manthra or Thirumanthra makes the person selfless, the selflessman is a person of all prosperity.

The evil temptations (Saptha Vyasanas) are as dangerous as that of bite of a cobra. And the Thirumanthra helps the family man freed from all temptations.

It is thus that Sri Krishna manthra makes the life of the family man purposeful and fruitful.

The Alvar wishes that the family man should always cherish in his mind and heart the meaning of Sri Krishna manthra or Thirumanthra which advocates surrender - selflessness - service.

(2) Here is another sloka transliterated into English:

**Vyāmōha prasamoushadham, munimanovritthi
pravritthyaushadham
Daithyēndrārthikaroushadham, thribhuvanē sanjeeva
naikoushadham |
Bhakthāthyanthabithoushadham, bhava bhayapradhvamsa
naikoushadham
Shrēyah prapthikaroushadham piba manaho Srikrishna
divyaushadham || (No. 24)**

Substance : Sri Krishna manthra is the best divine medicine that cures the disease of ignorance. It is the medicine that keeps the sages' minds steady with the knowledge of the omnipresent. It is the medicine that puts an end to the devils of evil. It is the medicine that gives life and energy to all the three Lokas (the three worlds). It is the medicine that does much good to the devotees. It dispels sin and fear. It is the medicine that grants well-being and deliverance (Moksha). Such a medicine, so divine and so wonderful, is Sri Krishna manthra ! Oh, Mind ! take it ! (Oh, let me relish the medicine of Sri Krishna manthra).

A brief commentary on the substance of the sloka :

“The divine medicine of Sri Krishna” (Sri Krishna Divyaushadham) does not stand for “Sri Krishna Japam or Sri Krishna Bhajana” as stated under the previous sloka. It stands for Sri Krishna's Thirumanthra, or Geetha charama sloka which advocates surrender - selflessness -service. The spirit of surrender - selflessness - service is a medicine that puts an end to all evils of the mind, like ignorance, fickle mindedness, the feeling of suffering, the evils pervading the world, lack of proper thinking and suggestion, the sin and fear, the state of ill-being etc.

The Krishna-consciousness or the Thirumanthra consciousness keeps the man free from ignorance. It makes

the sages always conscious of the existence of the omnipresent force (the Vaishnava power). The sages are selfless persons thinking and acting for the welfare of the world (Loka Kalyana). Thirumanthra makes the man selfless, and for the selflessman is not a victim of the devils of sufferings - selfishness curtails all progress individual and social. Selflessness gives life, energy and light to the person or the society; and it is the Thirumanthra that advocates selflessness - A real devotee (Bhaktha) is selfless, and it is selflessness that develops the spirit of "love and surrender" (Bhakthi Bhava). The Thirumanthra makes the man selfless, and a selflessman does not commit any evil. Hence there is no cause for him to entertain any fear of danger from others. The Thirumanthra releases you from bondage : The ordinary man is just like a worm, or fly caught up in the spider's web. The Sri Krishna-divine medicine keeps you healthy, and keeps your mind free from all evils. It delivers you from all sins. Hence man should necessarily take in the medicine of sri Krishna's Gospel.

Consider how beautiful the above two slokas of Kulasekharalvar's Mukundamala. They are not only exquisite devotional pieces, but also splendid literary pieces of elegance with fine metaphors. The metaphorical descriptions or comparisons of Sri Krishna's Gospel, with divine and purifying and enobling manthra or spell and with a wonderful divine medicine, a panacea for all human ills, are indeed marvellous. The whole of Mukundamala is not only a famous devotional composition, but it is also a literary production of poetical excellence. Besides the verses contain divine instructions are to be followed in his life to make his life enjoyable, purposeful, fruitful and eventful. The poem is elevating, enlightening and reforming effect. It is figurative and artistically beautiful appealing to the reader's thirst for love of the virtuous and the divine aspects (it is said to be "Alankarayuktha" and "Rasabharitha" in Sanskrit).

Kulasekharalvar visited Tirumala once and stayed there for some days during his country wide tour, visiting all the sacred Vaishnava shrines. Standing before Lord Venkateswara, in his emotional ecstasy, Kulasekharalvar praised the glory of Sreenivasa in the ten splendid Tamil pasuras extempore; and all the ten pasuras reveal his philosophical attitude to the spirit of surrender - selflessness - service. This is clearly elaborated in my other book by name "Thirumala Thirupati Venkateswara Divya Vaibhavam".

(3) An other sloka from Mukundamala transliterated into English :

Krishna thvadiya padapankaja panjarantham
Aadyaiva mē visathu mānasa rājahamsaha |
Prānaprayana samayē kaphavāthapitthaihi
Kanthavarōdhanavidhau smaranam kuthasthē " | |

Substance : "O, Krishna ! let the swan of my heart enter the abode of Thy lotus feet now itself; for who knows that at the moment of my last breath my throat may be suffocated with phlegm, followed by biliousness, then how can I think of Thee ?"

A brief commentary on the substance of the sloka :

Kulasekharalvar wishes every person to be Krishna conscious every moment of his life. He cannot expect to think of Sri Krishna at the last moment of his life, for he might not be fully conscious at his parting moment.

The comparison employed here in the metaphor is really delightful.

As Sri Krishna gave in the Gēetha the Charama Sloka or the Thirumanthra, he is regarded as the "Jagadguru" (the universal teacher). "Krishnam Vande Jagadgurum" = "I salute to Thee, O, Krishna, the universal teacher". It is quite proper that we should respect and be grateful to Sri Krishna, who

had given to the world the Thirumanthra that keeps the person away from sins. Sri Krishna should ever be remembered. The remembrance of "Sri Krishna" keeps the person conscious of the Thirumanthra.

It is not the simple remembrance of the name Sri Krishna, or the simple utterance of the "word" that is required of the person or devotee : He should be conscious and be aware of the etymological meaning of the word. The word, Sri Krishna stands for "The universe and the universal sustaining power". "The Chara Achara rupa" = the whole universe in its the animate and the inanimate, the static and the dynamic form. The word, "Krishna," means "the black; He = He that is not seen = He that is incomprehensible. The omnipresent power. (The Vaishnava energy is not to be comprehended by the five senses. It is to be felt by the innermost recess of a thinking and glowing mind). The incomprehensible omnipresent power is personified as "Vishnumurty" or "Sri Krishna murthy".

The Prabandha of Mukundamala abounds in such elevating and divine thoughts.

The pouranic (epic) Alvars were three in number, Prhlada, Vibhishana and Bhishma. And the Vaishnava devotees believe that Kulasekharalvar was born in the aspect of Prahlada. (Prahlada is of the epic Maha-bhagavatha, Vibhishana is of the epic Ramayana, and Bhishma is of Mahabharatha.)

According to the Prabandhas it was established that Prahlada sought, explored and found the existence and the depth of the omnipresent energy or the Vaishnava power. He had declared, "There need not be any doubt about Chakri (God) existing everywhere". "He (personified) is everywhere" = "It is everywhere". The Vaishnava force is the omnipresent power. "It is the energy that exists in the "animate" as well as in the "inanimate" = "It exists in the "chith" as well as in the "Achith". This is the "Thatthva Thraya

Gnana" propounded in the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha. As Prahlada knew this universal truth, he could ever be happy; He was an embodiment of happiness. "Hladam" = Happiness. "Prahladam" = the excessive and ever present happiness. "Prahladaha" (Sanskrit) = "Prahladudu" (Telugu) - is a case of personification, which pervades the spiritual Hindu Prabandhas. According to the story of Prahlada, his knowledge and awareness of the Vaishnava power had become his divine path of life; it was his divine Manthra which redeemed him from worldly attachments; it was his divine medicine (Divyaushadha) that prevented and cured him of any evil effect of sin. It was the "Manthra" that he had kept always in his meditation. He was free from any fear or suffering. He was ever a Prahlada, a person in ever growing elation. These were the thoughts conveyed in the three selected slokas of Kulasekhara's Mukundamala, that have been presented in this chapter.

Ofcourse the readers can learn about the three pouranic Alvars, Prahlada of Krithayuga, Vibhishana of Threthayuga and Bhishma of Dvaparayuga in the epics concerned namely Mahabhagavatha, Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The philosophical attitudes of these three pouranic Alvars are clearly described by me for the benefit of the readers in my other book, "Sri Bhakthi Saram". The twelve Alvars (Dvadasalavars or Dvadasa suris) described in this book are of this Kaliyuga and their biographies are extracted from their writings and from the local histories of places and shrines which they had visited.

Kulasekharalvar's life was full and systematic. He passed through all the four stages of a complete life, namely childhood (Balyam), youth (Youvana), Manhood (Koumaram) and old age (Vardhakya) - These four stages of life are said in Sanskrit as "Jeevitha Chathur Dasas". Kulasekharalvar also passed through all the four periods of a regular religious life, (the Chathurasramas) regularly and systematically, namely Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Vanaprastha and

Sannyasa. He lived a scrupulous life of self perfection and social service (Loka Kalyana Seva) for the welfare of humanity. The pious, sacred, fruitful and eventful life of Kulasekharalvar stands as a unique example for one and all in general and for real devotees in particular.



6. Thondaradippodi Ālvār



Thondaradippodi Alvar's original name was Vipra-narayana. He was born to caste Brahmin parents. His place of birth was Thirumandangudi. He was born in the auspicious month of Margasira in Dhanur-lagna of Jyeshtha Nakshatra. He got the title of Thondaradi-ppodi-Alvar on account of his simple and pure piety and devotion. Thondaradippodi Alvar (Tamil name) = The dust of the feet of the Devotees = (Thondar = devotee, adi = feet, ppodi = dust). The same

in Sanskrit is Bhakthānghrīrēnu. (Bhaktha = Devotee, Anghri = feet; Renu = dust). The Vaishnava devotees consider him to have been born in the aspect of Sri Vishnu Murty's Thulasi garland, Vijayantimala have been already furnished in this book elsewhere. The complete natural vegetation of this world is said to be the garland of the omnipresent (Vaishnava) power. Hence the Vijayanthi is said to be evergreen : There is no state of fading in this case. Further, the name and fame of the Alvar is evergreen in the minds of the devotees. Hence it is proper that the Alvar was born in the aspect of Vijayanthi.

The following is the Thirunakshathra sloka pertaining to this Alvar :

Kōdandē Jyēshtha nakshathrē

Mandangudi purōdhbhavam |

Chōlōrvyām vana mālāmsam

Bhakthapādarēnu māsrāyē | |

Substance : I bow in salutation to Bhakthapādarē nu Ālvār (Bhaktha + Pada + Renu) born at Mandangudi of Chola Kingdom, in the aspect of Vishnumurthy's Vijayanthi garland, in Dhanurlagna of Jyeshtha Nakshatra of Margasira month.

Vipranarayana was pious and devoted from his boyhood onwards. When he was a youth of about sixteen years of age, he left his place of birth for good and reached sacred Srirangam. He established a leafy abode for himself (hermitage or Parnasala) in the temple's vast Thulasi garden, where he used to take shelter at night. During the whole of day he was seen watering the Tulasi garden, tending the plants, plucking Thulasi and flowers, making beautiful garlands of Thulasi and sweet smelling colourful flowers. He was offering the garlands every morning and evening to Sri Ranganatha of Srirangam shrine. He remained unmarried and took an oath never to see the face of a female with lustful eyes. He treated any maid as sister and any woman as mother, whenever he happened to see them on his way to the temple and back to his garden abode. He was like a "Sarvasanga Parithyagi" (a renouncer of all worldly attachments), and all people, devotees and visitors to the shrine, wondered at his piety and celibacy when they saw his beauty and his youthful state. It was perhaps due to his devotional and unique attachment to garland making for Lord Sriranganatha that he was considered by the Vaishnava devotees to have been born in the aspect of Sri Vishnu's Vijayanthimala.

A few years passed like this. The visitors to the temple also made it a point to have the "Darsan" of this young saint in the garden, who was always silent and unmindful of any visitors in his garden work and in his garland making activity. It appeared as though he was the only individual, in the world and his sole company was that of Sriranganatha. He was in his joy in his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. He felt he was always in the company of the Lord.

It so happened that one day a young virgin maiden of angelic and voluptuous beauty and grace, Devadevi by name, belonging to Vesya community (a community in which the girls were not married, but remained all their life as professional prostitutes in olden India. This community does not exist now in the present Indian Hindu Society) came to Sreerangam from a distant place, and having worshipped Sriranganatha in the shrine, visited the temple garden, where she saw the most handsome young man, Vipranarayana, watering the Thulasi plants. She stood stand still at the rare sight of Vipranarayana, fulfilling with vigour, lustre beautined to the golden complexion and cupid's handsomeness. She stuck up to the ground where she stood at her first sudden glimpse of the youth. She could neither take back her looks from him, nor could she physically move from that point of her standing. She stood gazing at him for long unconscious of her time and surroundings. She intensely loved him mentally, and desired to have him as her husband. She had already known before entering the garden with the other visitors, about the vow of Vipranarayana - never to see the face of a female with lust, except with a sisterly nothing feeling. Hence she was not bold enough to approach him or to open any conversation on any pretext. She decided to stay in the garden somewhere in a bower in a corner.

From the next day onwards Devadevi regularly and all the day time, started attending to watering the plants and tending them. Having observed her working in the garden for several days, in a way lending her mute services, Vipranarayana, one day, softly questioned her, "May I know who you are ? Why have you been here all these days attending to gardening ?"

Devadevi replied solemnly and softly, "I am a maiden born in Vesya community. I came from a far off place. I am Devadevi by name. I came to Srirangam on a pilgrimage along with some companions from my native place. Having

worshipped Sriranganatha in His holy shrine and having been influenced by the glory and the pious atmosphere of this sacred place, I have decided to stay here all my life and never return to the place of my birth. All my companions have gone back leaving me here to my holy decision. I have dedicated my life and all to Sriranganatha. I have chosen, as you have done, to remain in this vast Tulasi garden in a corner and to do garden work here in service to the Lord. I am an expert in garland making. I shall have the pleasure of offering flowery garlands to Sriranganatha. This is all about myself, Sir". Concluding thus, she pretended that she was not concerned with any thing or affair any more, and turned to her job in all haste and fervour.

"Be it so", said Vipranarayana briefly, softly and pertly, and turned to his job moving away from her. It was as if he had committed a slip suddenly and that he had corrected himself quickly. He never had opened his lips in fact to any human being for the last so many years since he reached the temple garden.

Devadevi stood still musing within herself, "Let me wait and see how long he can be reluctant ! Let me see how long he can abstain himself from talking to me when I continue to move nearer and nearer to him, ofcourse in the pretext of garden work. Will he not be caught in my net some day hence, if not now? Why should I be in a hurry? Let me observe him and his reactions if any in course of time. What happened to Visvamitra in Menaka's net? For the present I have got one unique fortune for which I should bless myself: I have the continued and uninterrupted chance of being in his immediate vicinity enjoying the rare sight of his handsome form and his beautiful movements : I love him and I enjoy with him mentally ! Let not my eager mind flare up for the present ! I leave my destiny to providence! I need not worry my-self for the present". Her immediate satisfaction and success were one that Vipranarayana did not banish her from

his vicinity or from the garden. It was for her that half the battle was won.

One afternoon in summer Vipranarayana was sitting on a mat in his Parnasala (leafy abode) and was making garlands. Suddenly the clouds collected in the sky and hid the bright sun. There was a sudden gush of wind followed by a very heavy down pour of rain with pealing thunders and dazzling lightnings. Devadasi, who had been working in the garden, got drenched, suddenly stepped into the near-by Vipranarayana's abode, and stood there shivering with chill weather; water was flowing down from her head and garments.

Vipranarayana had a sudden glimpse at the shivering intruder; he was by nature a person of tender feelings and sympathy. As a reflex action he took his upper cloth into his hands and threw it at Devadasi. She received the upper cloth, turned aside there within, ofcourse within the sight of Vipranarayana, removed her wet saree and wore the upper cloth of the young saint, which was hardly enough to cover her shivering body; she squeezed the water from her wet saree, which she spread over to the sides of the hermitage to be dried up. Vipranarayana, who got the sight of the voluptuous beauty of her half-naked body, suddenly forgot him-self, got lost into admiring the beauty and symmetry of her angelic organs, and could not draw back his weakness of mind at that moment. In short, he was a victim to cupid, suddenly stood up in his utter blindness of sexual love and approached her in a fit of passion saying, "I love you, Devadasi; We shall be married !"

The cunning tricks of ladies ofcourse were proverbial, for which Devadasi was not an exception. She preferred to display some reserve to immediately accepting his offer. She said with a broad smile of condescension with voluptuous looks, "you must give me dowry of one thousand Varahas (Varaha = four rupees) before courting me as your wife".

Vipranarayana readily said, "O, yes, I shall in the joy that she accepted his love; for the present the dowry fixed by her did not receive much of his discrete attention and thinking. After a while Devadevi left the presence of Vipranarayana; she had worn her own saree again, left there on the mat Vipranarayana's upper cloth, and left for her leafy abode in a corner of the garden.

From the moment of her departure from his presence, Vipranarayana fell into a deep reverie. Said he to himself, "How can I get such a huge amount? when can I secure it?" He had not even a wink of sleep all the night. The thought of Devadevi affected his mind so deeply. While eyes open or closed, he was only seeing the image of his lady love, Devadasi. The idea of Sreeranganatha got erased from his mind temporarily ! Whereas he had been uttering or musing or thinking of Sriranganatha's name or image previously till he fell into the net of Devadevi, now he was thinking of Devadevi and nothing else.

Similar was the mental disposition of Devadevi ofcourse. She criticised within herself how she was so foolish enough as not to enjoy the boon granted into her hands so suddenly, fortunately and unexpectedly. If she had not stipulated the condition of the dowry, she would have become his better half on the day of the providential shower itself. Now she had to reap the consequences of her own reservedness and her cunning stipulation. Vipranarayana felt for his follishness in suddenly accepting to pay her the dowry and to marry her only after fulfilling it. Had he pleaded his inability to pay the dowry at the outset itself, their meeting as wedded couple would have been then and there. They spent three days in this agony flared up by cupid, which they felt as long as three years.

Since the day of the shower their movements and closeness with each other became different. They were sitting together side by side on the same mat, while making garlands

of flowers and sacred Thulasi, looking and smiling at each other, exchanging skilful words of pleasant and amorous conversations. They were similarly cooperating with each other while watering the garden, tending the plants and plucking the flowers. The separation was only during the nights when they used to lie down for sleep in their own separate leafy abodes. But could they sleep soundly? They felt the night time too long in separation and the day time too short for company ! They were vying with each other in making the garlands quickly and finely. Vipranarayana was admiring her equisite skill in making garlands and was praising her that her garlands were more skilfull made and artistic than his. His mind was now retreating farther and partly away from Devadevi (Sriranganatha) as he was closed moving and close to Devadevi (his lady love).

It was an irony of fate, though temporary. The mind of Vipranarayana, the Sarvasangaparithyagi, which, had entered like a swan the cage of the lotus feet of Sriranganatha so many years, had now been captured in his lady-love's net! What a fall it was ! Devadevi who had come to be sacred Srirangam, and who had decided to lead the rest of her life in Srirangam itself like a Sarvasangaparithyagi, was now hit by cupid's arrows and was now a prisoner in the cage of sexual love ! what a fall it was ! - A sudden fall from the mountain peak of dizzy hights down to the abyss !

Oh, devotees ! what do you think this utter fall and what is it due to ? - Is it accident, circumstance or destiny? Is it not convincing to say that their fall was due to unforeseen circumstances ? A man of virtue should be aware of the circumstances whose occurence is neither logical, nor expected ! The results of our trials in life are influenced by so many forces - determination, efficient execution, sincerity, accident, circumstances etc. They are like the five tight fingers of the fist.

In respect of Vipranarayana and Devadevi, there was the force of influence of their previous culture of sublimity. That was why, though love was blind, they did not get into physical union suddenly; only the mental creepers intertwined, were crawling up the tree of life. Though, by accident, wise persons err, they don't too suddenly get into the nufra of blunder deeply. During such moments of hesitation they often rectify themselves from temptations, and get back to the straight path of righteousness. A person of culture if not always leisurely and in course of time regains his usual powers and composure of logical and rational thinking.

Within a few days, providentially but fortunately for both of them, a mysterious occurrence took place. It is usual and natural that a devotee attributes to God's grace for all good that happens to him; if on the other hand any evil happens to him suddenly or in this normal course he attributes his preordained destiny or fate ! And under such trying circumstances he is not perturbed nor bewildered nor broken hearted nor dejected, but remains calm and composed. This is the attitude of mental equilibrium of a Bhaktha (Devotee):

Sloka No. 56 of chapter 2 of Geetha is worth noting here:

**“Dhuhkhēshvanudvignamanā
Ssukhēshu vigathas purhah |
Veetharaga bhaya krōdah
Sthithadhīrmuniruchyathē” ||**

Substance : “A real devotee is “Sthithapragnah” (a person of strong mental equilibrium) who is unaffected by sorrow or joy : he is not broken hearted due to sorrow nor overjoyed in comforts. He is free from craze, fear or anger.”

Lines from sloka 18 of chapter 12 of Geetha :

**“Seethōshna sukhaduhkhēshu
Samassanga vivarjithaha |”**

Substance : A real devotee is unaffected by change in weather or climate nor is he moved by sorrows and comforts. He is of mental equilibrium and calm composure, and is uninvolved in any affair.

(The reader will soon be relieved to find these two devotees reverting to their legitimate straight paths.)

What was that mysterious episode that took place providentially that has been mentioned above? It was thus :

One day a very rich merchant from a far off place visited Srirangam for the worship of Sreeranganatha. Before getting into the temple after his morning sacred bath in Thiru Kaveri (The sacred Kaveri river), he happened to reach the gate of the temple garden, where Vipranarayana was squatting alone in deep meditation undisturbed by the approaching merchant. What was he meditating upon ? Was it on the universe and the universal sustaining power ? Was it for deliverance from sin (Moksha) ? No, not at all He was meditating for deliverance into sin and not deliverance from sin ?

Soon Vipranarayana recovered from his reverie, became conscious of his surroundings, saw the rich merchant standing near, and out of his natural goodness, love and kindness, he entreated the merchant to sit by his side on the pial. And then he entered into conversation with him pertaining to various points of his welfare, when he reached Sreerangam and if he had performed worship to the Lord. The merchant, who spent considerable leisure time with Vipranarayana, enjoyed his company very much and was pleased with his courteous and affectionate behaviour. He was very much impressed with the young saint's beauty of body and speech and above all his melodious devotional singing of songs on Lord Sreeranganatha.

While Vipranarayana was going on his ecstatic singing, the visiting merchant was thinking within himself, "worship

of God's devotees is worship of God himself. The presence of a Sadhu (saint) is tantamount to presence of God. Sadhunam Darsanam Punyam: Nothing is so auspicious as the presence of a saint". Said he to Vipranarayana, "Swami ! O, pious Sir ! Your life is blessed! Blessed is your history ! But I don't know why you appeared to be moody when I first approached you. I sense a sort of feeling of sorrow or dejection in you. Is it due to poverty? Any disappointment from what you desired ? I don't admit that saints like you should be in abject poverty of having nothing to wear, to eat and to take shelter from rain and sun. You may be self contented- you may not wish for anything. You may be free from any ambition; but every body requires the elementary needs to live; living is not breathing in and breathing out simply; it means something more. How can you spend your time in deep meditation upon God undisturbed, when your body is not healthy, when your body does not have the feeding and caussing, when you have other worries whatsoever ? Please look here. This box of mine contains in itself several valuable gold and diamond ornaments. I got them manufactured specially to be offered to Lord Ranganatha. I got the sign of "Sri Ranga" engraved on each out of my deep devotion. The actual engraved letters on each ornament run thus, "Sriranganāthārpana masthu". (I offer this to Sri Ranganatha).

"Please listen to me, O, young saint ! I don't find anything difference between offerings made to God and to His devotee. I don't find the least difference. Hear from me this one word of mine : There are several valuable and precious ornaments of gold in this Jewel-box. Of them I decided to present you one. All others I shall place at the feet of Sreeranganatha. (opening the box and holding a big golden plate in both his hands) Look at this plate. I am offering this one to you most willingly, sincerely and devotedly. Because I know the real attitudes of real saints that they don't receive any gift from any body, I have submitted you all this at length

at the outset. So kindly receive this without any delay or hesitation. I shall return home happily from my Srirangam pilgrimage with an eleted satisfaction that I have not only offered gifts to Sreeranganatha and worshipped Him, but also I have honoured a saint with a good present." Speaking thus lovingly, sincerely and devotedly, the merchant suddenly placed the golden plate on the lap of the squatting saint, bowed to his feet in utter surrender and salutation, and then left the place immediately. He later joined the ever flouring stream of pilgrims bound to the shrine with shouts of joy, praise and devotion, "O, Mangalam to Sreeranganatha - Jayahe - Jayahe - Sreeranganatha - Jayajayahe O, Sesha Sayee".

Considering all this as a rare boon due to God's grace, Vipranarayana took the shining golden plate into his hands, and thinking within himself with a feeling of joy and success, "Yes, I shall presently present this to Devadevi, my lady-love, and take her as my better-half." He entered his hermitage, the leafy abode in the Tulasi garden, where Devadevi was squatting on the mat classifying blossoms into groups to fecilitate her and her lover to make garlands quickly and with felicity.

"Devadevi, my love ! Behold this, the dowry demanded of me by you ! Some how I could earn this just this morning, the fourth day succeeding three days of incessant worry and anxiety after I had promised you that I would take you on payment of the stipulated dowry. I have spent these three long days as three ages; Oh, my love ! you demanded of me a dowry of one thousand Varahas only. This golden plate, studded with diamonds on the verge of the circular brim, costs even four thousand Varahas ! Receive this first and then allow me to share your love which is ofcourse of inestimable value for me, your slave in love !" said Vipranarayana in a spirit of ecstasy, while Devadevi was gazing at him and the plate of gold in utter bewilderment !

Bubbling with surprise, joy and excitement at the expected prospect of her owning Vipranarayana soon as her husband, Devadevi took into her trembling tender hands the golden plate and began to express without any reserve, "where could you obtain this valuable thing? How could you earn this ? Oh, what troubles and efforts you have been subjected to obtain this ! O ! what a cruch and unsympathetic lady I am to have demanded of you a dowry of one thousand Varahas ! Kindly excuse me ! But let me tell you frankly, my lord, what far is this plate for me ? what I am in need of most fondly is your love, your affection, your acceptance, your admiration ! Not any treasure except your love in this world! What I dote for is the sharing of your bed, and conjugal bliss with you ! Oh, out of a girlish stupidity out of cunning and falsely assumed reserve, I had stipulated a dowry to take me ! Oh, my beloved lord, you have considered it so seriously ! I only expected you would have received me into your warm and emotional embrace, laughing away at my stipulation ! Oh, how can I admire you, beautiful youth, being bound by a stipulation imposed by me as a matter of fun and fancy ! Oh, you are more scrupulous than scrupulousness itself. Out of lack of boldness, out of a feminine shyness, I just hesitated to approach you these three long dreary and anxious days ! I never expected that you would put forth all your efforts to satisfy me with the required dowry ! I never least thought that you would choose to court my love only after securing the stipulated dowry ! I am very sorry to realise how much of mental agony I had unnecessarily and unjustly caused to your tender body, heart and mind ! Please pardon me ! I don't want your golden present; I need only your golden mind, your golden love ! Sure, that is obtained now ! Blessed is my soul ! that is alright..... by the by, just for my information, just for my feminine frenzy, tell me how did you get this valuable plate !

(Turning the plate this side and that side, and finding some letters inscribed on it). Have you stolen this plate?! Oh, look here, at these letters ! Behold, there is the stamp of

God Sreeranganatha ! Oh, read this inscription - "Sreeranganatharpanamasthu" (offered to Sriranganatha). This must have been an offering piously made to God by a devotee. So this is literally God's property! How could you steal it from the temple treasury room ?! If not you, some other thieves should have stolen this ! How did you come to possess this stolen property ? Buying a stolen property or keeping a stolen property how ever it is obtained is tantamount to directly stealing ! Hark, your amorous lust has driven you to commit this abominable sin! But I am responsible for your sin; I have driven you my innocent lord to this extent ! I blame myself and I weep for this, sin of mine. Oh, what a disaster a bad lady has brought her mate ! perhaps based on this and similar experiences, saints have described family life as an ocean of sins and entanglements!..... Any how what has happened has happened ! What to do now ! What purpose is there for us with this golden plate? How can we display it? Any body will bring in an allegation at the first sight itself that this is a stolen property. Could you not have that little of imagination! What a great danger we are in ! What an atrocious act ! We can no longer live in this temple garden if anybody sees this golden plate kept with us. Perhaps, we are destined to undergo banishment from Srirangam itself, not to speak of this garden ! Or we may have to undergo imprisonment ! Can we escape from this place, from this danger ! Can we escape from imprisonment! Oh, what a calamity !"

So saying, Devadevi dropped the plate on the ground and began to weep bitterly while tears were flowing down in streams over her trembling cheeks.

Vipranarayana had not expected that things would go to this end. His innocent mind was oscillating between the feelings of fear and danger. He pooled his energies in a few minutes and then calmly said to her, "Devadevi, don't be afraid. I am innocent, this is not the stolen property, but a gift by a pious rich pilgrim, who before entering the temple and worshipping God, gave it to me out of his sympathy,

affection and respect for me. This has not been offered to God in the temple. It is no more temple's property. There is no question of theft here. Believe my word. Why, further narration, when you are in this nobody doubt and confusion. Wait here a few minutes; meanwhile I shall get that pilgrim who will testify to the truth".

So saying, Vipranayarana left the garden, and walked towards the temple crowded with the surging and jostling pious pilgrims. He was observing every individual keenly and closely. But he could not discover the wanted pilgrim who had presented him the golden plate. What could he do? Could the pilgrim in that short while complete his purpose of visit to the temple and could leave the temple? No, it could not be. He felt that the pilgrim should be somewhere along the way to the temple buying flowers and certain articles of worship. He began to walk back with searching eyes. In fact he had no fear, nor a feeling of apprehension of danger. His only anxiety was how to convince Devadevi! For that alone he made strenuous efforts.

In the meanwhile something unexpected took place in the garden! Two or three workers of the temple service, who had been working in the garden near Vipranarayana's cottage, had overheard the conversation of the lovers regarding the golden plate, and they had come to a conclusion that a golden plate, belonging to the temple, had somehow got into the cottage. They were in fact pious people devoted to temple service. They had soon run to the temple secretly and reported the matter to the chief executive officers of the temple. They were astonished at the report of theft.

The first member of the Executive Committee of the temple observed thus, "keep aside for the present the theft committed in the temple. Consider at first this point: Vipranarayana is unmarried. He has been living lonely in the temple garden. It was said that he had sworn not to look at a lady except with a brotherly respect. We have been under the impression that he is a great devotee and lives in

solitude! Who is that young beautiful lady living with him in his hermitage! What about their reported conversation? It should be concluded that they are mere lovers indulging in lust! Such hypocritical fellows can commit anything! Let us first examine them both". He ordered that the young lovers should be brought to him at once along with the temple's golden plate, as he thought it to be there in the hut.

Vipranarayana reached his cottage before the arrival of the temple servants with summons. He espied within the cottage the golden plate lying on the ground and Devadevi standing and bitterly sobbing punctuated by hiccoughs. Said he to her in an encouraging tone, "Oh, what a frail lass thou art! How innocent and tender? I have gone out to fetch the pilgrim to testify to the truth about the plate; unfortunately he is not to be traced out so far. Don't worry; Be patient. After taking food, I shall again set out and have a leisurely search for him within the temple area, at the choultries and in the bazaar. Please accept the plate and afford a feast to my love lorn eyes".

Still sobbing, Devadevi said, "even if the pious pilgrim had presented this plate to you, yet this should be considered as a stolen property. Though it was given to you before the pilgrim had gone to the temple to present his offerings to God, it belongs to God: The pilgrim while starting on a pilgrimage to Srirangam, decided to offer it to God along with other gifts of gold. The pilgrim had no right to alter his choice later and to gift the plate of you. This is God's. The inscription on the plate denotes that it was already mentally offered to God. When once a promise to do something good is made, the person has no right to take back his promise even before the accomplishment of the deed. This is for all purpose God's property".

While Devadevi was still arguing loudly like this sobbing intermittently, the temple servants rushed into the cottage and found in one glance the golden plate on the ground between them. They summoned the lovers to follow them to the temple authorities atonce.

It was a strange spectacle on the road leading to the temple, the temple servants with staffs in their hands and carrying golden plate, walking to the temple hurriedly with firm looks, and the lovers walking in the middle with bewildered looks of utter innocence, insult and fear. All the people on the way were astonished at this atrocity and followed them to the temple authorities to witness further action. The supposed culprits were made to stand before the Chief Manager of the temple. There was a huge crowd of pilgrims and spectators looking at the supposed hypocritical devotees, Vipranarayana and Devadevi, in wonder and contempt.

The trial commenced. The people-the devotees, the pilgrims, the temple priests, the temple servants and others thronged around to witness the affair. It was like an open court. Nobody there had any sympathy, but contempt, for the supposed culprits, the young lovers. Vipranarayana in a bold tone narrated that the golden plate was presented to him that very morning by a pious pilgrim, and added the whole incident thread bare. No body could believe his statement. (Justice depends on proof and not on statement). The spectators were talking among themselves that the young lovers were suspected the reason for their living together in the same cottage in the temple garden all the previous days, which was not known to any till that day.

The bewildered Devadevi was looking around silently as if she were insane. In the meanwhile this news spread everywhere in and around the temple like wild fire. It reached the ear of that rich pilgrim, the actual benevolent gentleman who had in fact presented the golden plate to Vipranarayana that very same morning at the garden gate; he was then lying in a peaceful corner in a Mantapam within the temple compound taking rest after a heavy dinner on the condition of hectic movements like worshipping of God and presenting the offerings to God in the temple. The awful news disturbed him most: said he to himself, "what a

misfortune that innocent Vipranarayana has become a victim of public suspicion and censure."

Thinking so, he rose up instantaneously, ran to the spot of trial and loudly announced, "This golden plate belongs to Vipranayana. It is me that gave him this plate this very morning. He is no longer guilty; he is pious, upright, selfless and innocent". He then narrated the whole story of his presenting him the valuable golden plate. All the spectators that thronged the place realized the truth to their astonishment.

The Chief Manager of the temple felt sorry for the wrong and haste he had committed in conducting a summary trial without first making any preliminary enquiries. He repented for the throwing the blame on Vipranarayana and for pronouncing him an immoral hypocrite. He took both hands of Vipranarayana into his hands and pleaded for excuse and pardon. Vipranarayana, who was standing like a statue with deep thoughts about the omnipresent power and the sequence of circumstances, shed silent tears of repentance for his recent mental weakness in falling in love with Devavdevi, and stood long in prayer to Sriranganatha, the omnipotent energy responsible for creation and existence.

Devadevi was also in a similar position, bodily and mentally, in similar spirit of repentance, and surrender to god. The chief manager of the temple was also standing, facing them both like a statue in prayer to Sriranganatha for his blunder and haste. The whole crowd stood in utter silence.

When all returned to normal senses, the chief manager of the temple put the golden plate into the pious hands of Vipranarayana, who along with Devadevi walked straight into the temple to the gate of the sanctum sanctorum, and placed the golden plate at the feet of God's idol. Both of them offered prayers in silence to Sriranganatha looking at His merciful, benevolent and all enlightening eyes, and felt within themselves a blissful grace of God. They then together

walked back to the temple garden with their heads bent in meditation, while all the people, pilgrims and devotees extolled their innocence and pure piety. They silently entered their cottage; they felt rehabilitated and restored to the spirit of utter surrender to God, the omnipresent, from which they had been shaken of late owing to circumstances.

After a while, both of them sat at the trunk of a big Ashvatthah Vriksha (peepal tree) and were in deep and long meditation regarding the recent lapse in their upright and pious lives. There was a deep and thorough revision of their attitudes. There should be a thorough evaluation of life if it is influenced by Arishadvarga (the six enemies or sins) of which the sexual instinct plays the greatest havoc if one is not disciplined.

Said Vipranarayana to himself, "I wanted to remain a bachelor all my life and to scrupulously observe celibacy and to devote my entire life in the service of God; what a misfortune that I should be tempted by the voluptuous beauty of Devadevi. Oh, my life has temporarily become sinful and polluted even though I realize my blunder now and repent for it. Fire upon me!" and he wept bitterly for a long time.....

Said Devadevi to herself, "I was born in a community of professional prostitution; I realized my unfortunate and sinful birth when I came to my teens. I was afraid that I would be led to such a horrible life of prostitution shortly. I hated my own voluptuous beauty. I thought what for was my beauty and grace, if I had to be led to a wretched life of adultery; having been born in this cursed community of Vesyas (prostitutes), I realized long ago, when I came to the age of thinking and discretion that I was destined not to marry a chosen husband, with whom to lead a chaste life! I had firmly decided not to fall into prostitution; I wanted to remain as a spinster to observe strict celibacy; I dedicated myself to God and to live in life-long devotion and divine meditation. I wanted to extricate myself from my sinful bonds of parental home.

I came away to Sreerangam and offered all my belongings to God Ranganatha. I sent word to my parents through co-pilgrims that I would never return home, that I have become a nun and that I would lead my life till the last in Srirangam in devotion to God. When such has been my stand and decision, I have committed the worst and cruel atrocity of tempting the innocent and pious bachelor - saint Vipranarayana with my voluptuous beauty. I have unfortunately become a victim to cupid's arrows of armour and I made him too a victim to sexual appeal. I not only spoiled myself but also spoiled another innocent brother like saint. I am a cursed wench, an evil imposter and a criminal, and my actions are inexcusable and unpardonable. Can I repent and become eligible to God's grace? No... Is it not proper for me to end myself?... No, it is purposeless further I should not think their everything is in my hands. All goes according His will and the way of providence! I must be reunited to piety and God - I surrender to Him....."

So thinking she burst into a loud weeping and sobbing to the extent of appealing to the sympathy of Panchabhuthas (The five natural elements constituting the universe).

Thus both Vipranarayana and Devadevi bathed in the stream of tears, in the stream of repentance; washed off their sin, and emerged as fresh renewed souls of purity and devotion. They both fell on each other's feet and decided to lead the rest of their lives like brother and sister in Srirangam in the service of the lord. They began their usual life of making garlands to God, worshipping the Lord and exulting themselves in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava (feeling one with the omnipresent power; Sesha-Seshi Bhava).

The people realized the greatness of their divine love and devotions of the pilgrims, after worshipping God in the temple, used to visit the temple garden and to pay respects to the great Bhakthas, Vipranarayana and Devadevi.

Vipranarayana was ever singing songs of his own composition in praise of Sri Vishnu at all moments of his

wakefulness. How his brain worked in his moments of sleep and in the moments of sub-consciousness, he alone should or could know. He was ever found in ecstasy of Vishnu Samslesha Bhava during all his activities of watering the garden, plucking the flowers and Thulasi Dalams and making garlands. His rhythmic movements appeared as accompaniments to his melodious singing. Devadevi was his devoted pupil, and the guru and the sishya were ever inseparable. Each of them saw God in the other. Their Vaishnava Samslesha Bhava progressed in full communion. Their presence and movements in the temple was a spectacle of supreme devotion. They enjoyed longevity of divine life of worship, prayer and meditation.

Vipranarayana, who believed that it was a Para Shakthi alone (The divine power) that had saved him from his fall, came to feel that God alone defended, supported and protected his oath of celibacy. Out of his devotion, humility and surrender to God and His devotees, Vipranarayana assumed the self-awarded title, "Thondaradippodi".

Thondaradippodi = Thondar + adi + Ppodi = Devotee + Feet + Dust.

The same title, Thondaradippodi is called in Sanskrit Bhakthaghirenu.

Bhaktha + Anghri + Renu = Devotee + Feet + Dust.

He preferred to call himself or to be called by all others as Thondaradippodi or Bhakthaghirenu.

And the devotees began to call him with the additional word, Alvar. He became famous in his life time itself as Thondaradippodi Alvar (Tamil) or Bhakthaghirenu Alvar (Sanskrit). He is named so in Tamil Prabandhas. How beautiful is the name! How fitting, how inspiring! (Thondaradippodi Alvar, Thiruvadigalli Saranam = I salute to the feet of Thondaradippodi Alvar)! (Thiru = sacred. Vadi = feet. Cali = Twain. Saranam = Surrender).

Thondaradippodi Alvar, who was a gifted scholar and poet both in Sanskrit and Tamil, composed two famous Prabandhas of devotion in Tamil, by name Thirumalai and Thiruppalliyelucchi, in praise of God Sreeranganatha. It was ofcourse, "The Alvar's way" of producing devotional literature in the spoken language of the people for easy comprehension. All the twelve Alvars, you will learn in the course of study of this book, were erudite pandits and poets both in Sanskrit and the regional language, Tamil and all of them produced divine literature in both the languages; but their productions in Tamil were more and it was with a purpose as explained at the outset in the second chapter.

Thirumalai Prabandha of chaste Tamil pasuras (stanzas) is in praise of Sreeranganatha. Thirupalli Yelucchi of sweet Tamil pasuras is to greet God early in the morning and it equals Thiruppavai of Andal and Sri Venkateswara Suprabhatham. The devotional and literacy excellences of these Prabandhas are explained in detail in my other book, Sribhakthi Saramu. The readers are advised to reap the enjoyment by the study of Sribhakthi Saramu.

You will soon hereunder learn the substance of one or two pasuras of each of these two Prabandhas, which are furnished to enable the readers to have a taste of them.

As already stated in Thirupalli Yelucchi of the elegant pasuras, Thondaradippodi Alvar greets Sri Ranganatha with Suprabhatham. Thirupalli Yelucchi = Thiru + Palli + Yelucchi = Sacred + Bed + Waking up = Waking up God from his sacred Bed.

It should be noted that all the twelve Alvars were saint - poets.

Thirumalai Yānīyā, a great devotee (a disciple of Yāmunācharya) described the greatness of Thirupalli Yelucchi in the following sloka thus:

Sloka: "Thameva mathva paravāsudevam
 Rangesayam Rājavadarhani yam |
 Prabōdha kim yō krutha sūkthi mālām
 Bhakthānghrirēnum Bhagavantha mīdē ||"

Substance : I bow in salutation to Thondaradippodi Alvar, who not only worshipped with the deepest devotion, the idol of Sriranganatha, but also considered the idol as the very personification of the supreme being, Srimannarayana and composed the most celebrated lyrical ode addressing God Himself direct to rouse Him from sleep.

"When God is said to be Thribhuvana Sundara (the embodiment of all the beauty of the three worlds and when the idol of Sriranganatha stands to signify the supreme triple aspects of Goodness, Beauty and Truth, it was quite natural in his emotional import ecstasy of the highest poetical order that Thondaradippodi Alvar considered the idol as the actual breathing God before him".

The following is the substance of the very first pasura of Thirupalli Yellucchi of ten pasuras:

"The sun presents himself as the universal burning light to dispel the outward darkness enveloping the world"

Should not you, our Sun, rise up now from your bed to dispel the inwards darkness, the ignorance, haunting the minds of the humanity?

Oh, Sreeranganatha, it is just morning and the sun has risen in the east; The dense darkness has left the world; best blossoms of different hues and scents worthy worship have bloomed in plenty with honey in their cups.

The angels, the kings and devotees are arriving in throngs; The sounds of their vehicles, the elephants and the horses are hoarse everywhere like the unending roar of the ocean waves.

The devotees of and worshippers are standing in huge groups at the gate of your sanctum sanctorum;

Oh God Ranganatha, wake up from your sacred bed and kindly accept the worships of the eager devotees".

(Please examine carefully the inner meaning and implication of this pasura: In stating that there is no God other than Sriranganatha idol, there is the particular true philosophy. That truth is revealed here. This is not at all blind superstitious belief in or worship of the Idol. The most important and the primary aspect is that the truth or the ideal, for which the idol stands as a sign or symbol or significance, should be known! When you worship the idol, you are worshipping a great truth or ideal. The idol is not a mere stone just as a page in the scripture is not a mere paper. You understand what the paper contains (the ideas and the thoughts) and you respect the paper for the ideas it contains. Idol worship is not the worship of a stone; it is the worship of a great ideal. Whenever you see a sign board, you try to learn what it conveys; so also whenever you see a picture or an idol you should first try to learn its significance, the truth which it establishes. This is the divine or devotional or spiritual part of it.

Now come to the great literature of the pasura and understand the beautiful features of the morning time and the description of scenery and sounds with a sensuous appeal.

That it is the spiritual knowledge (a scientific truth recognized with wonder and emotion), that dispels the darkness of ignorance is the eternal truth, which deserves proper understanding.

Thirumalai Prabandha is of forty five pasuras in praise of God. It is a grand garland of 45 superb Parijatha flowers - the pasuras. It resembles Mukundamala Prabandha of Kulasekharalwar in content and composition. The difference

is only that Thirumalai is in Tamil and Mukundamala is in Sanskrit.

Let us learn the substance of the first pasura of Thirumalai:

"Oh Sreeranganatha of the sacred temple of the island bound on either side by the Kaveri river, (ubhaya Kaveri Madhya Pradesa), the protector of the devotees! Oh the power responsible for all creation, who kept concealed all creation within himself in Pralaya and who released it again in all its detail! (Pralaya = Total annihilation at the end of KALPA). With the strength of the knowledge of your auspicious names, gained from great saint Gurus, we have conquered the SELF and the instincts and the Arishadvarga (the six sins) and we are purged of all sins and impurities; we now go about roaring the sounds of success for we need not fear Yama and his kinkaras.

(Note the references to the pouranic episodes, the metaphors employed and the symbolism).

(One need not be afraid of death, if he knows the etymological meanings and the significance of all the thousand names of God, Vishnu Sahasra namavali. A person, who has such a knowledge of God's name and who minds his character and conduct, does not fall into sin. He feels himself one with all universe and the universal sustaining power and feels a sense of brotherhood with all: In other words, he lives in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. One, who has understood the first eleven chapters of Geetha, is bound to develop Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. He is a devotee in the true sense of the term; he leads the most upright life which leads him to the spirit of surrender selflessness - service, which is the essence of philosophy. And this is the essence of the charama sloka of the Geetha).

The following is the substance of the second pasura of Thirumalai:

"Oh, Sreerangatha! Oh, Devadeva (God of gods), with an azure - sapphire - mountain like sacred body with red coral lips, with bright lotus eyes, not letting down any of your humble devotees! O, Gopala, the protector of the humanity and the cows! There is no sweet juice in the whole world greater than the juice of praising you and feeling one with you. Such a devotee as I possessing a tongue to bring in praise you will not choose to go too far even to enjoy the supremacy of Indra Loka (Heaven)".

(The Alvar is not at all concerned with death and heaven after death; he least worries himself about them. He does not think in that system of belief or philosophy. What the Alvar ardently wishes for is to live in joy and satisfaction and in a state of bliss sans any worries, anxieties and entanglements, which state of mind is called MOKSHA BHAVA, the state of having been delivered from all worldly ties. The clear understanding of the meanings of God's innumerable auspicious qualities (Vishnu Anantha Kalyana Gunas), the assuming of such qualities onto himself and to lead a blemishless life of service and good will constitute MOKSHA, or MOKSHA BHAVA or Vaikuntham. The MOKSHA state is the state of mind of a person while living and not after death. Such is the pure, real and ennobling philosophy of the Alvars. This is a unique and most desirable, ethical philosophy of life. In fact all religion, all philosophy are for the happy ethical progress of humanity where as unfortunately several so called philosophers are coming out nowadays as monks with long beards and in orange robes preaching about Geetha and philosophy, something in the air, in a dogmatic way, which neither they know nor practice. They come out as licensed preachers, as fund collectors as honourable beggars etc. and corrupt the minds of the people! What a tragedy).

7. Thiruppani Alvar



Thiruppani Alvar was born in panchama caste of Uraiyur (a village in present Tamilnadu, famous for handloom industry) in the auspicious moment of Vrischika lagna of Rohini Nakshathra of Karthika Masa of Durmathinama year (the year by name Durmathi). The Vaishnu Prabandhas maintain that Thiruppani was born in this world in the aspect of Sri Vishnu Murthy's Srivatsalanchanam.

The following is the Thirunakshathra sloka pertaining to Thiruppani Alvar:

Sloka:

**"Vrishikē Rohinjātham Sripanam Nichulāpurē |
Srivatsamsam Gāyakēndram Munivāhana māsrayē||"**

Substance: "I bow in salutation to Thiruppani Alvar, also called Gayakendra and Munivahana, who was born in this world in the aspect of Srivatsalanchanam, in Nichulapuri (now called Uraiyur) in the sacred Vrischika Lagna of Rohini Nakshatra".

Thiruppavai = Sripani (Sanskrit). Thiru = Sri = Sacred or auspicious. Pani = Hand.

Thiruppani = The person having an auspicious hand. (for, his hand was always engaged in playing on the Lute (Veena) while he was singing melodiously sweet sacred songs of his own composition in praise of God. His hand was also auspicious and sacred as it produced splendid sacred pasuras in glorifying God Sreeranganatha. His hand thus worshipped God with the Lute and pen, ~~welded~~ by his hand.

There is a line in Prahlada charithra of Andhra Maha Bhagavatha as follows:

"Hari Pū janamu Lē ni Hasthambu Hasthamē ? Tharusākha nirmitha darvi gāka". It means, "Does a hand deserve to be called a hand if it does not worshipping God. No, it is a wooden ladle!"

Hence "Thiruppani" and "Sripani" are fitting names for this Alvar as well as "Gayakendram". Gayaka + Indra = Gāyakendra. Gāyaka = Musician. Indra = the king or the greatest. He was a very great musician vocally as well as on the Lute.

How he came to be called Munivahana (one who role on the shoulders of Muni or Rishi or Sage) will be known as you read the story. The whole story centres round this term "Munivahana or Yōgivaḥana".

Thiruppani had left the place of his birth while quite young; it was not known where he had wandered for a long time and what temples and sacred places he had visited. But he came to appear on the sands of the Kaveri river, when he was a youth. He was found always singing songs in praise of Sreeranganatha of Sreerangam temple in a state of exalted ecstasy with a lute in his hand. Often he was seen dancing in joy on the banks of the Kaveri while he was singing pious songs. He called Sreeranganatha Periya perumal (Periya + perumal = The great God; Devadeva; the God of gods. As this Periya perumal was sreemannarayana or Sriram or Srikrishna for Kulasekharalvar, for Thiruppani Periya Perumal was everything, the Omnipresent and Omnipotent). The rustics and the farmers working in the fields on the bank of the river, or those common village folk walking that way, used to feel that he was a pious young man, but mentally not sound, for they could not understand his Vaishnava Samślesha Bhava, for he was often found laughing and conversing with a superior power surrounding him, which was ofcourse incomprehensible to ordinary minds.

As he was born in the Panchama community, he could not get entrance into the temple of Sreeranganatha; why, he could not even approach the outer ends of the temple streets. It was the unfortunate practice in the Hindu society of those days that the Panchamas were treated by all the other four communities (Chathur Varnas) not only as untouchables, but also they were not allowed to walk through the Brahmin streets, why to speak of temple-entry. *

*How and when this worst and most undesirable inhuman social evil crept into the Hindu society of this Bharath, no historian can correctly trace out. This nonsensical social custom has its sanction and authority only in the so called scriptures said to have been given (humorously, ironically or rediculosouly) by God himself, which God did not give such a scriptural authority for other races of the world! It is unfortunate, barberious and shameful for certain so called Sanathana pandits and philosophers who still defend this inhuman evil. Are they human beings in the correct sense of the term? The moment when the serpent or satan of the evil of untouchability or casteism crawled into this evil-fated Hindu race, it was doomed. The caste system has been the casue for the crooked mindedness of the race, for mutual strifes, for physical mental and spiritual degenerations.

Thanks to the efforts of Sreeramanujacharya (1017 to 1137 A.D), the propagator of the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha, who denounced the prevalence of caste system, more so the evil of untouchability to which the poor Panchamas were victims. Thanks also to Mahatma Gandhi of this century, who took the evil of untouchability most seriously and tried his best to wipe it out from the Hindu society. Thanks also to most of the wise national leaders, heroes, wise scholars and reformers who are still working hard in this direction not only through legislation but also through preachings and personal contacts.

Despite all this what should we say of some Hindu sectional societies, sanghams and some individuals, who still advocate casteism in the name of religion and scripture? Should not a Hindu (caste Hindu) feel shameful to meet another person of another race or nationality and speak to the latter about the greatness of his country's past and present when there is still the evil of untouchability, lurking secretly in urban areas and barking aloud in the higher pitch in the rural areas?! When such is the horrible situation, should not the teachers of philosophy and sociology feel it as their moral or social duty or obligation not to confine themselves to their classrooms only, but to extend their impact into the wider society personally and through

Thiruppani was always found on the bank of the Kaveri singing in praise of Sreeranganatha gazing at the golden towers and spires of Ranganathaswami temple. He was dancing and singing in ecstasy with his lute in his hand completely absorbed in devotion. It was not known when he would sleep, where he would take food etc. Often he was found lying on the ground unconscious of his surroundings and musing within himself the auspicious names of God. He was a beautiful person with golden bright complexion, and his face was like the rising sun. He was living in his own world and he had not any contact or acquaintance what ever with any other person.

One morning the Chief priest of Sreeranganatha temple, Lokasarangamuni or Vararangamuni by name, a very erudite pandit in the divine Sanskrit scriptures, was walking from the Kaveri river with the golden vessel of sacred Kaveri water on his head for the morning Abhisheka and Archana of God. [Abhisheka = sacred bath given to God's idol = Thirumanjanam (a term used for Abhishekam in a Vaishnava temple). Archana = worship]. Lokasarangamuni espied before him, Thiruppani, lying on the ground in a sleeping state, across the footpath on the sandy bank. The priest could not walk by the side of a panchama, who was an untouchable; perhaps even the wind or weather blowing over the panchama was considered impure and prohibited! Lokasarangamuni cried out in anger and disgust for the obstruction and delay caused, "Ohre, panchama! Get up and move aside! You lie like a log across the path. Could you not find any other place for your sleeping? Stupid! It is late in the morning and you a lazy good for nothing for is still snoring! Get up, fool, move away". So saying he stood like a pillar fretting and fuming.

pamphlets to erase this black spot of evil customs and superstitions? They should train their students to utilize their powerful and bubbling energies for this aspect of social service; and then only their classroom learning and bookish erudition become meaningful, purposeful and fruitful.

Thiruppani, who was not in fact asleep, but who was not conscious of his surroundings owing to his immersion in the Vaishnava Samslesha Bhava, did not hear the shouts of the priest. As there was no response of any kind from the lying Thiruppani, the priest felt he was dishonoured and insulted; he became fiercely irritated. He suddenly bent down took into his right hand a small stone with sharp edges and threw it at Thiruppani, which struck hard on the face of Thiruppani. He opened his eyes, saw the Brahmin priest standing near, and with a quaking of fear and guilt that he had unknowingly delayed the priest for a while in his discharge of divine duties, he rose up and was quickly moving aside saying, "swami! Praden this fool for his senseless act.

Lokasarangamuni then proceeded on his way to the temple. The spectacle of this occurrence, his striking Thiruppani with a stone, and the latter running away in humility and fear, came to his inward eye, and then into deep contemplation. He was originally a person of learning and culture, but not one of rustic obstinacy. There was contemplation wisdom dawned on him. He realized his mistake, his irritable haste, and he repented. A sloka from the Geetha suddenly flashed across his mind and he began to apply the substance of the sloka to his conduct.

Sloka:

**"Vidyā Vinaya Sampannē Brāhmanē, Gavi, Hasthini |
Shunichaiva Svapākēcha pandithāha Samadarsinaha||**

Substance: He is the real profound scholar of erudition who treats kindly all either a real Brahmin of learning and humility, or a cow or an elephant or a dog or the Chandala who eats a dead dog's flesh unaffected, prejudices.

While Lokasarangamuni was slowly pacing on the way to the temple with the vessel of Thirtham (sacred water) on his head, he fell into a deep and long contemplation, "Am I a real pandit? Am I wise with my bookish learning? If I were

wise and really learned, would I treat Thiruppani so meanly and so cruelly? Would I throw a stone at him as a rustic throws a stone at an animal? Ah, how foolish, ignorant and stupid I have been! How inhuman and cruel I have been! How blind and proud I have been! Further, what was the reduction of Thiruppani to my inhuman and cruel conduct? Let me clearly recollect - instead of becoming offended by my cruel gesticulators and harsh words - Thiruppani was neither angry nor vexed, on the other hand he expressed he was at fault and he requested for pardon! With looks of fear, guilt and humility, he just moved away! Oh, how I can admire his character and conduct! Lord SriKrishna, Geethacharya, says **"Thulyanindā sthuthirmouni santhushtō yēnakēnachith | Anikethaha Sthiramathihi bhakthimānmē priyō naraha ||"** - *That person is dear to me, who treats with equanimity praise and slander, who is calm and contemplative with full satisfaction with what is available for the moment, and who is unattached with a strong powerful will?* - As per the Geetha doctrine, Thiruppani is the real Bhaktha! How can I claim to be? I am stuck up like a worm in this most impure deep pool of superstition, ignorance, meaningless customs of MADI inhuman practices like untouchability etc. which are after all applicable of the BODY which is subject to disease and decay and which is but temporary in this mundane world! I have been getting corrupted and purified every moment due to the evil of ignorance and superstition! I have been thinking of the body forgetting the soul. I have failed to realize that every individual soul is a speck of that divine universal soul? I ignored the Upanishadic truth" that the same soul pervades all the bodies" - **"Athmavath Sarvabhuthani"** - I only got byheart the upanishadic lines ignoring the fact that their substance is meant to guide human behaviour.

"What is untouchable? Is it Thiruppani's body, or his soul? What is important? - The body or the soul? - I lost discretion! What for is my scholarship, my erudition? How does Geethacharya define a real Bhaktha or devotee? - Like this -

**"Adhveshtā Sarvabhūthānām Maithraha Karuna Yēva cha
Nirmamo mirahankaraha samadhuhkha sukha kshami |
samthushta sathatham yōgī yathāthmā dridha nischayaha
Mayyarpitha manōbuddhihi yo madbhaktha ssame
priyahall"**

Substance : "He is the real Bhaktha, and he is dear to me who bears love and friendship to all beings and lives with malice to none, who is rid of egoism and favouritism, who is of mental equanimity to all changes, who is patient and of an excusing temperament, who is ever contented with what he has, who is scrupulous and determined and who surrenders to God".

Oh, I badly lack these qualities of a Bhaktha! Where as Thiruppani does possess all these virtues in abundance. How guilty I am! I am merely a two legged animal as I failed to understand what Vaishnava Bhava is (the belief in the Omnipresent of God)! What is all the Vedic or scriptural learning for? It is to enable the person to lead a virtuous life in a wise manner. All my Vedanthic erudition has failed to enlighten me properly towards a good life. Thiruppani is not an untouchable; I am in fact an untouchable having ignorantly considered him an untouchable! I wrongly thought, that Thiruppani did not belong to any one of the four communities, Chaturvarnas - Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. Even now I realize that he does not belong to anyone of these four varnas: He belongs the varna (community) of Nithyasuri, a supreme and divine varna to which in puranas Garuda, Anantha, Lakshmi, Narada, Thumbura, Prahlada etc. are said to belong.

A Nithya Suri is one who, by birth is virtuous and pious untainted with any sin, and who ever dwells in VISHNU or Hari in a sate of ecstasy. Thiruppani is a Nithyasuri; Thiruppani is an Alvar. As Thiruppani Alvar is a divine personality, by insulting God himself. I had struck with a

stone cruelly God Himself and not Thiruppani Alvar. I am a sinner; I have denounced the existence of God in the pious Thiruppani Alvar. He is no an ordinary devotee, an ordinary worshipper and thinker; he is an Alvar! I, who had flung a stone at Thiruppani to rouse him from sleep, am ever asleep in the lap of ignorance. He was not asleep then; he is ever awake in the state of awareness of the universal truth. It is the ignorant man like my sinful soul that is asleep; it is the wise thinker like the divine Thiruppani Alvar that is ever awake. He that remembers the body, forgets the soul. I have lost my soul; I am a bundle of flesh and blood! Thiruppani Alvar is one born in this world to uplift sinners like me. He is not an untouchable; keeping myself away from him I have become an untouchable, a chandala. I have lost all rights to worship God, to approach God Ranganatha, and ever to enter Sri Ranganatha's shrine".

Lokasarangamuni, who was walking slowly thus contemplating profoundly, was almost unconscious of the distance he had covered so far by walking. He opened his eyes wide, and suddenly he found himself just at the gate of sanctum sanctorum of Lord Sriranganatha! He suddenly placed the golden vessel of Thirtham on the ground there, and began to run back to the river bank like a lunatic crying aloud, "I have found out, I have found out!" All the people, the devotees and the other temple worshippers were surprised at this spectacle, and they all sped to the river bank in astonishment to know what it was.

Lokasarangamuni was running with tears rolling down his cheeks, and he was like a miser searching for his missing treasure. He was running, he was weeping, he was falling flat on the ground in utter surrender (in Sashtanga namaskaram) and again rising up and running. He was crying out aloud, "where is my dear treasure? Where is my liberator my saviour, my deliverer? Where is that divine personality?" He soon reached the sandy banks of the sacred Kaveri river.

Just near him was lying on the soft sand bed, made warm by the morning sun. Thiruppani Alvar with half closed eyes, singing in melodious divine strains. He appeared like Prahlada in smiles and in Vaishnava Samslesha Bhava. Thiruppani just was aside in meditation, unconscious of the environs. Lokasarangamuni touched him with his eager hands in his attempts embrace him. Thiruppani just came to full consciousness with the touch of another's hands, and opening his eyes, he saw Lokasaranagamuni near.

Suddenly he rose up and began to move aside expressing whole heartedly in all innocence and reverence to the Brahmin priest, "swami! What is it! Should you touch me, a panchama?" Catching him by his two hands, Lokasarangamuni exclaimed, "Lord, my lord. O, Alvar! Should you test me further? He embraced Thiruppani lifted him up to his shoulders and ran back to the temple, while huge crowds of devotees and pilgrims followed Lokasarangamuni carrying Thiruppani Alvar on his shoulders. He was like Nithyasuri Garuda carrying Srimahavishnu on his shoulders. It was all like the procession of God with awe and wonder and joy. Lokasarangamuni; on reaching the temple, walked around sanctum sanctorum, thrice, and then gently dropped Thiruppani on to the ground just at the gate of the inner shrine. This is the episode as to how Thiruppani came to be called a Munivahana and Yogi Vahana Alvar (one who rode on the shoulders of Lokasarangamuni or Lokasaraanga yogi).

Thiruppani Alvar was standing there singing devotional songs in ecstasy playing on his lute. While all the crowds of people were gaping in wonder, the doors of the inner shrine were opened, and the bells from the doors were ringing loudly, as if to announce an occasion of joy and success.

Thiruppani Alvar who enjoyed for the first time the Darsan (sight) of the Mulavirat Idol (the main and immovable idol in the inner shrine), which he had been dearly

cherishing to see all his life till then, felt so overwhelmed by satisfaction and bliss, that he remained flat on the ground in Sashtanganamaskaram, unconscious of his surroundings. Coming to full senses after a time, Thirrupani Alvar gazed and gazed without the wink of his eyes in pleasure, reverence and wonder, and enjoyed the sight of the divine auspicious idol which represents the universe and the universal sustaining power. He was able to comprehend the splendour of Pancha Vibhutis of Srimahavishnu and the Arthapanchaka gnana pertaining to the omnipresent Vishnu, which are represented by the most auspiciously attractive and grand idol of Sriranganatha. (Pancha Vibhuthis = The innumerable Vibhuthis or aspects or manifestations of God as enumerated in the Vibhuthi yoga of the Geetha, tenth chapter, in the Rajavidya Rajaguhya yoga, ninth chapter and Vignana yoga, seventh chapter etc. are classified under five main aspects namely para, Vibhava, Vyuha, Hardra and Archa: Para = All the wonderful nature outside yourself; Vibhava = The awful and beautiful splendour that the universe around you presents; Vyuha = the structure, the formation and the arrangements of various aspects and forces of creation around you; Hardra = the life force that you feel within your heart or the Atmabhava; Archa = The idol symbolic of the universe and the universal sustaining power.)

Due to his knowledge and wisdom and wisdom of the universal sustaining power, his emotional experience that power and his deep and elegant literacy skills, emanated, a sacred Prabandhas by name Amalanadippiran, describing the beauty and splendour of the different organs or parts of the Archavathara (idol) of Sriranganatha swami came into existence. He sang it extempore. Thus was - the divine act of Thiruppani Alvar. As he was carried from the banks of the sacred Kaveri river to the sanctum sanctorum of Sreeranganatha by the learned chief priest Lokasarangamuni on his shoulders, Thiruppani Alvar came to be called Munivahana or Yogivahana. (Muni = yogi = saint. Vahana =

vehicle for conveyance i.e. one who rode on the shoulder of Lokasarangamuni).

Amalanadippiran of Thiruppani Alvar is one of the most prominent Tamil sacred scriptures (Dravida Veda Prabandhas). It is noted for its deep understanding of the Divinity, the universe and the universal sustaining power.

Amalanadippiran is noted for its alround spiritual knowledge and wisdom, for its brevity, for its authoritative teachings and for its easy presentation. It is brief like word "Om" containing within itself all the scriptural knowledge and universal understanding. It is not so wide and vast as the Maha Bharatha epic containing all ethics and spirituality. It has just ten Tamil pasuras pervasive of all wisdom and comprehension of the universe.

Amalanadippiran presents a pure direct and sacred picture of the Almighty; it is highly devotional with an deep awareness of the universal truth; it is a sacred invaluable literacy piece in Tamil language.

In Ramayana, Maha Bharatha and Maha Bhagavatha you find very many stories of wise and sacred devotees; at the same time you find stories of wicked persons doing harm to pious and innocent people. You have the stories of the saints or Rishis, besides which you read stories of the demons and the wicked persons. There are many stories of wise Vasishta and Viswamitra, besides the stories of wicked Maricha and Subahu. There are stories about Sri Krishna and Dharmaja etc. At the same time there are stories about the wicked persons like Sisupāla, Sakuni and Duryōdhana. There are stories about pious Prahlada and Bhishma; and there are stories of the evil minded Hiranyakasyapa and Kamsa. Like wise, the three great epics deal with stories of godly persons as well as devilish individuals; there are the positive elements as well as the negative elements in these epics. But Amalanadippiran deals with only positive and pious aspects; this Prabandha indicates that ungodly and wicked

things should have no place in a sacred epic. Why should you present a bad person and ask the readers not to imitate him. You present a virtuous example and advise the readers to follow virtue.

Though Nammalvar's Thirumoli does not present the two differing aspects like the epics, the author has taken much strain and trouble to employ his own logic to establish the oneness of God, the oneness of the Trinity, and his convincing philosophy etc.

Though the Thirumoli Prabandha of Thondaradippodi Alvar does not contain all such logical strains, yet the Alvar has enumerated his gains and losses, and his likes and dislikes in his Prabandhas.

Though the Thiruppallandu Prabandha of Periyalvar does not display these so called limitations, yet it first enumerates all the qualities and aspects of the three divine forces of the universe, namely creation, existence and destruction, the beginning the middle and the end, and then in the end establishes the uniqueness of the glory of Sreemannārayana.

Unlike all the above mentioned Prabandhas, Amalanadippiran directly shows the way for the feeling of oneness with the omnipresent Vaishnava Shakthi by the twinpaths of Ekēśwarōpāsana (the thought of the one and the only one supreme force sustaining the universe) and the Samslesha Bhava (an emotional identification with the supreme), which are all described directly, briefly understandably, purely, piously and without any controversies and double interpretations. Without resorting to the complexity of different aspects of the supreme like the Para, the Vibhava, the Vyūha, the Hardra etc. Thiruppani Alvar directly enjoys the sight of the Archavathara (Idol) of Srirangasayi that was before him in all its splendour and appeal - (Sriranga = The arena of the universe - sayi = all pervading - sarva vyapthaha). Thiruppani Alvar, standing

at the golden gate of the sanctum sanctorum, praises the universal lord to his hearts content in a state of blissful ecstasy, which formed this unique sacred Prabandhas, Amalanadippiran, and so it is considered by the Vaishnava devotees as the purest and most sacred of the Dravida Prabandhas.

Thondaradippodi Alvar, in his Thirumalai Prabandha, describes in a spirit of joy and due pride, the "Alvar" as an everflowing life stream of foaming and bubbling flood (of water) bound by the two banks of either side, Jeevathma (the life) and Paramathma (the life supreme or eternal); Thiruppani Alvar does not display even this type of righteous exuberance of pride and joy. He felt he was Dasanudasa (the Dasa of the Dasas i.e. the servant of the pious devotees) and dedicated himself to the lotus feet of Sreerangasayi in the utter surrender. His nature and disposition were alien to criticizing and disliking other's beliefs and ideologies; he entertained no philosophical conflicts and entered into no logical contests. Like Anjaneya of Ramayana epic, Thiruppani Alvar knew and recognized the only supreme lord or Devadeva or Periya Perumal. (Deva Deva = The God of Gods. Periya perumal = The Great God - The Lord supreme). His mind was filled with the thought of the supreme Lord only.

Thiruppani Alvar believes that the same omnipresent power (Vishnuhu) pervades Vaikuntham and Kshirabdhhi of the epics of the one hundred and eight sacred shrines now present. The worship of Sreeranganatha of Sreerangam (ubhaya kaveri Madhya Desa) is tantamount to worship of Vishnu in Vaikuntham, in Ksheerabdhhi and in all the present one hundred and eight shrines on this earth, for the Sreeranganatha idol is a perfect symbolic representation of the whole universe and the universal force. Thiruppani Alvar says that even in Vaikuntham or Paramapadam of the epics, the Vaishnava aspect may not be so full and perfect as in the Archavathara of Sriranganatha, whose appeal in direct and

profuse. Such is the clear and pure thought of the Alvar. He believes that Periya Perumal alone is what he should obtain and what he has obtained, who instilled in his mind the divine thought and who prevented him from any folly.

Thiruppani Alvar does not say that Periya Perumal is greater than this god or that god; He says there is only one great god, Periya Perumal. Such is the purity and clarity of Thiruppani's mind.

Different schools of thought evaluated differently the contents of the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmasutras and the epics as being partially true, inconsistent and controversial. Great saints had tried to compare them all and logically evolve the common truth, of whom some failed and some succeeded partially, for it was not possible to convince all people at one point. Thiruppani Alvar did not subject himself to such erudite, scholarly and rugged paths of philosophical discussions; He did neither reject or condemn others, beliefs and ideologies; he did not concern himself with what others wrote or said about the supreme. His outlook was purely direct and positive - one thought, one without a second, without an equal, without a rival and without a similarity - the supreme was the one, the only one, beyond description, beyond comprehension. This was the belief of Thiruppani. (**Ekamēvādvithīyam** - this is a line from the Brahmasuthras, meaning, one without a second).

Who ever is attached to the Divine thought and completely detached from all other temptations can comprehend the 'Pancha Vibhuthis' of the supreme force, and he will enjoy them all in his worship of Sriranganatha as revealed in Amalanadippiran.

This is the supreme and unique greatness of Amalanadippiran Prabandha, which I have presented in all detail with reference to contents and implication in my other book, SRI BHAKTHI SAARAM, as this book is limited to biographies and achievements, more cannot be expected.

Sri Ramanuja, who lived in far later times, (1017 A.D. to 1137 A.D.) learnt in his boyhood days the sacred story of Thiruppani Alvar from his Acharya, Kanchipurna (Thirukkacchi Nambi) felt much enlightened, and he was much inspired by the teachings of Thiruppani in his eventful life of service and in his propagation of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha. As Sri Ramanujacharya was of such a pure, pious and kind heart as a Thiruppani's, the closest disciple of Sri Ramanujacharya, Kūratthalvār by name, extolled Sri Ramanuja likewise in a Sanskrit sloka or Thaniyan:

Yō nithyam Achyutha padabja yugma Rukma

Vyāmōhithāha Thaditharāni Thrināyamēnē |

Asmāth Gurōho Bhagavatho sya dayāika sindhōho

Rāmānujasya Charanau Sharanam Papadyē||"

Substance: "I surrender to the feet of Sri Ramanujacharya, my Acharya divine, who is always enamoured of the gold of the lotus feet twain of the eternal Sri Vishnuhu, considering every other wealth of this earth as grass".

Such is the divine effect of the story of Thiruppani Alvār, which enlightens and inspires real devotees.

No Alvar spoke anything particular of The Beyond after Death. They did not speak of Heaven and Hell. Their example and mission was that a person should lead a life of happiness and of Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. All their writings indicate this blissful mission of life.

What Thiruppani Alvar particularly makes clear is "Paramapada" is just living in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava and in Samslesha Bhava with Sriranganatha Archavathara, which mirrors the universe and the universal sustaining force or forces. Paramapada is not a different heavenly world as epics tell. Paramapada is a way of life, a supreme way of life of surrender selflessness - service; it is a way of life of bliss. (Parama = sacred, unique. Pada = a way of life).



8. Thirumangai Alvar



Thirumangai Alvar was born in a certain sub caste of Kshatriya tribal family at Thirukkuraiyalur near Thiruvai Thirunagari. The vaishnava devotees believe that he was born in this world in the aspect of Sri Vishnu Murty's Bow, Sarngam. He was born in Vrischika lagna of Kritthika Nakshatra of Karthika month of Kali Nalanama Samvatsara. He was

originally named by his parents Neelam or Neelavarna (which meant Krishna).

The following is his Thirunakshatra Thaniyan or Sloka :

**“Vrischikē Kritthikājātham Chathushka Visikhmanim |
Satprabandha Kritham Sarngamūrthim Kalihamāsrāyē”||**

Substance : “I bow in salutation to the Kaliyuga Alvar, Thirumangai Alvar, born in the aspect of Sri Vishnu Murty's Sarngam, in Vrischika Lagna of Kritthika Nakshatra, who is the author of Vaishnava Satprabandhas, (the author of six sacred scriptures of Vaishnava cult) and of four poetic skills.

Neelan or Neelavarna was later called Thirumangai alvar when he became a petty ruler of an area called Thirumangai. This Thirumangaivar came to be called Thirumangai Alvar when people and devotees recognized him as an Alvar. The present story is just an elaboration of this point.

Thirumangai was the son of a tribal chief (Mleccha Chief) in Southern Chola kingdom. As a youth he was distinguished as a powerful young man in the field of war and soon he became the commander of a small army under the Chola king. Later he was made an administrator of a small area under the Chola king.

As a youth, Thirumangai, despite his power and wealth was a lover and admirer and follower of virtue, peace and happiness. He was a Vaishnava devotee and discharged his duties as a ruler of his small state according to tenets of justice, sympathy and generosity.

Thirumangai was an unmarried youth when he became the ruler of a small territory under the Chola emperor. One morning when he was riding on horse back on the bank of a lake, he happened to see a young Vaishnava girl walking to the lake with a vessel in her hand to fetch drinking water. He fell in love with her on first sight. He was attracted not only by her voluptuous beauty of the body but also by her sweet words of dignity, reserve and politeness which she uttered in response to his few short questions of personal enquiry. Thirumangai decided to contact her parents on his matrimonial affair.

Who was this Vaishnava girl? Hers was a strange story lending interest to the reader! As an infant she was discovered amidst the lotus flowers on the bank of a lake by a Vaishnava devotee and scholar who had been to the lake for his morning sacred bath. He was fascinated by the beauty of the baby, who he felt, would have been left there that very dawn by her parent or parents, for what reasons god alone should know. He carried the destitute baby home and offered her to his barren wife, who adopted the baby as her own daughter thinking that it was the God's gift to the devoted childless Vaishnava couple. They brought up the baby tenderly and affectionately with all parental care and concern, and this was the young maiden seen by

Thirumangai on the bank of the lake. She was called by the beautiful name (sacred name of Thirunamam), Kumudavalli. (Kumuda = red lotus flower. As she was found amidst Kumuda flowers, she was named Kumudavalli by her foster Vaishnava father).

When later Thirumangai contacted the Vaishnava devotee for a matrimonial alliance with his foster daughter, he felt he was in a fix and at last came to a decision to give his daughter full freedom in the affair. She was a clever and wise girl devoted to her foster parents and to Lord Vishnu. She was a Brahmin Vaishnava girl of poor but devoted Brahmin parents. Thirumangai was a tribal ruling prince, or chief. Any displeasure caused to him by her might and her parents get into trouble. Of course inter community marriages were strictly prohibited during those days.

She fell into a deep contemplation before expressing her will - "Thirumangai is a young powerful ruler. Rejecting him is only courting trouble, not only for me but for my parents also. Having brought me up so dearly to this age, they should not be made victims to the displeasure of the ruling prince. This is my first and primary consideration. Secondly, I may not be able to convince Thirumangai that intercaste marriage was to be prohibited. So it is proper not to reject him. I am a Vaishnava girl, and as a true Vaishnavite girl I can accept him as he is a Kshatriya Vaishnavite. Vaishnavism does not over stress in principle, the barriers of caste, though this principle is not in practice. So I have to express my willingness to marry Thirumangai to please him and to protect my parents from troubles. As he is a Vaishnava I shall stipulate a convincing condition for him to be fulfilled before the celebration of the actual marriage function. Let what may happen in the end. It is all the will of Sreeranganatha to whose service I had dedicated myself long ago".

Kumudavalli raised her head and began to speak to Thirumangai in all modesty and sincerity in the presence of

her anxious parents and the wondering retinue of Thirumangai - "I accept to marry you, O Prince! provided you accept to fulfill my stipulation which is this: If you feed devotedly and properly one thousand Vaishnava devotees each day for 365 days, I shall marry you immediately after. You have told me that you are a Vaishnava devotee, and it is but proper that you should honour this Vaishnava maiden's ardent wish. I shall feel that my life attains sacred fulfillment if one thousand Vaishnava devotees get food for a year on my account. Then I shall willingly marry you as I shall be convinced you will be a real Vaishnavite in spirit, if not by caste".

Let us trace the development of thought in the inner recesses of her mind: Kumudavalli was a person of wisdom and was aware of her childhood. She was a great devotee having dedicated herself to Lord Sreeranganatha long ago. She thought that if Thirumangai accepted to fulfill her condition perfectly, he should be considered as a real Vaishnava. By the end of one long full year the bud of Vaishnava fragrance in him might blossom into a huge flower of thousand petals with many hues and fragrance. It might lead him to become a great reformer of the Vaishnava cult. So in the mean while she need not reject him for marriage. The Vaishnava seedling in him would surely grow into a might oak in one year taking into consideration his age, his power, his goodness, his piety and his accepted execution of the condition stipulated by Kumudavalli. When he would be reformed into a Vaishnava saint in dedication to the Lord and nothing else, she could happily be his follower and disciple. It was with this sentiment of bringing reformation in him, she had stipulated that religious observance (Vratham). That was all: She neither decided to marry nor to deceive him. She wanted to reform him by a wise and peaceful plan. There was ofcourse no question of her marrying any human youth while she had dedicated herself to Lord Sreeranganatha long ago, she entertained a strong

belief that she would obtain God's grace to that extent. She had expressed her stipulation to Thirumangai in all sincerity of mind, word and deed and to convince her soul or conscience.

As for Thirumangai, he was virtuous, calm and thoughtful; he was wealthy, powerful and authoritative, capable of accomplishing any task: he had admired not only Kumudavalli's beauty and virtue but also he liked her for her Vaishnava dedication. That was why he readily accepted to accomplish the "Vratham" proposed by Kumudavalli.

Thirumangai started the observation of the Vratha of Vaishnava Bhaktha Santharpana. A vast area was covered with pandals (temporary sheds) for the shelter of the Vaishnava devotees and for the arrangements of meals for them on a festive level. The place became attractive for all the Vaishnava devotees and pilgrims and it was on the way to Sreerangam. It was like a sacred shrine with chorus of singing of pious songs (Bhajanas) by the Vaishnava Bhakthas, with pious conversations among the pilgrim devotees, with discussions of devotion on philosophic topics and with distributions of daily feasts (Thadiyārādhana). This was a place of pilgrimage peopled by Vaishnava devotees with Urdhwapundra marks on their faces (The marks of white Thirumani and red Sreechurnam). Not only one thousand Vaishnava devotees had their food there everyday, but also so many workers, supervisors and innumerable pilgrims of all communities had the benefit free food and shelter. By the end of the few months all the money, wealth and resources of Thirumangai were exhausted. The continuation of a successful observance of the Vratha became a problem for him. How could he celebrate Vaishnava Bhaktha Thadiyaradhana for the rest of the year? The expenditure daily was huge. He felt it would not be possible for him to execute his project unabated with the help of collection of subscription or alms.

At last he came to fine conclusion: There were all types of people among the streams of pilgrims bound to Sreerangam everyday. Besides good and devoted pilgrims, there were some evil minded people also in greater numbers, who ignorantly planned a pilgrimage to Sreerangam with a belief that their sins would be annihilated by God! There might be some rich pilgrims who were originally by nature or deeds, wicked and selfish who might have amassed much pelf by wicked ways of exploiting the poor and innocent, by unjust trade and transaction of money lending at unreasonable rates of interest, of corruption and bribes etc. Thirumangai decided to rob such pilgrims on the way of their belongings meant for being offered as gifts to Sreeranganatha. He felt it was not wrong to rob such pilgrims and to feed the devotees from out of the wealth plundered. Even if they were meant to be offered to God as gifts and even in that such wealth was to be considered as God's, Thirumangai felt that there was no wrong in spending God's wealths for His devotees, for the poor and the suffering of His creation who deserved help.

He collected some faithful followers who were strong, powerful and skilful. They hid themselves in groups in sacred places behind huge bushes of trees on the way in the forest leading to sacred Sreerangam, and started plundering the rich pilgrims. Thirumangai's instructions to his followers were that they should rob only the rich pilgrims and not to touch the ordinary and poor pilgrims. On the other hand instructions were given to his followers not to physically handle any pilgrim; it was only the money and gold that was needed. His followers were further instructed to guide the poor pilgrims to the place of Santharpana for food and shelter. Though the pilgrims were moving in groups, they had to surrender to Thirumangai's men as the latter were greater in numbers and in strength. The different groups of hiding near the foot paths leading to Sreerangam on all sides and Thirumangai was moving on horse back from place to place directing his men.

The collections from plunderings each day were huge enough for the conduct of Vaishnava daily Santharpana. On account of Thirumangai and his followers infesting the different foot paths in the forest, the professional thieves, who had been in the forest previously, could not carry out their usual enterprises, and in fact the forest was rid of professional thieves. Some of them, who still remained in the forest, surrendered to Thirumangai and joined their hands as faithful followers. The pilgrims, though plundered by Thirumangai's men, could not think that they were wicked cruel thieves, for they all wore Urdhvapundra marks (Namams of white and red) on their faces and were not rash; there was a method in their attacks of the pilgrims. The pilgrims, who could see Thirumangai on horse back, could not take him to be an ordinary thief or robber, for he appeared well dressed, gentle and cheerful. The robbery was regularly committed everyday in respect of rich traders, rich travelers and rich pilgrims to Sreeranganatha temple.

In respect of plundering the Vaishnava pilgrims, Thirumangai felt sincerely like this - "I myself, who is a devotee of Sreeranganatha, will collect from pilgrims on the way all the gifts meant to be offered to Lord Sreeranganatha. I spend all the wealth of these gifts on the Devotees of Sreeranganatha Himself. May God, who is the lover and protector of his devotees, approve my discrete and pious project of thus serving His devotees. No harm is done to God's devotees and no wrong is meant for God. God's money is to be enjoyed by God's sincere devotees!"

Devotees, wise men and common people, who came to learn about the daily Vaishnava Thiruvaradhana conducted by Thirumangai, understood the selflessness of Thirumangai and appreciated within themselves the conduct of Santharpana to the devotees and the common people. Only the selfish rich people, the land lords, the rich merchants and money lenders, who were exploiting common and innocent people, disliked and hated Thirumangai.

One day Thirumangai himself met on the way a newly wedded young couple who were proceeding to Sreerangam with a box filled with a golden gifts to be offered to Lord Sr  eranganatha. There were not other pilgrims nearer on the way then. This couple perhaps belonged to a distant place and did not hear about the prevalence of robbers in the forest paths leading to Sreerangam. They were quite bold and suspected no danger when they saw Thirumangai getting down from his horse and approaching them.

Said Thirumangai to the newly wedded couple, "I think you are pious pilgrims bound for Sreerangam. In that case, I hope your box contains gifts of gold and silver to be offered to Sreeranganatha. If so hand over all to me; I am collecting all God's gifts and carrying on God's work!"

The young couple did not seem frightened. After all they were selfless people and were going to offer gifts to God, not to earn and not to save wealth. Besides they seemed to be wise, and suspected no danger from Thirumangai who appeared cheerful and polite. Further they thought that it was simply wise to surrender to robbers in the forest when they were alone and helpless; other wise they would welcome only trouble, danger and suffering; besides losing their belongings they might become victims to torture. So with all wisdom and common sense, they gained boldness and cheer with a spirit of reconciliation to the situation at hand.

Said the young man to Thirumangai, "O, Sir, we shall do as you bid us to do. But, will you please tell us your name? May I know who gave you this authority to collect God's gift, to collect here itself in the middle of the forest to be offered at the feet of Sreeranganatha of Sreerangam temple! Will you show me your credentials? If you tell this, we shall hand over all our belongings, kept in this box, to you here itself with all joy and satisfaction". So saying the young man put the box of gifts on the ground at the feet of Thirumangai, who, they thought, was the robber-king of a strange nature.

Thirumangai was much impressed with the youngman's look, style, courage and assumed joy; he rather felt started a little. Looking at the young man curiously a while, for he had never come across such a bold and resourceful youth, Thirumangai gently said, "I am called by the name, Thirumangai. (With a bright smile on his red lips) Did you think that I would hesitate to give out my name? My name is well known to all people of these parts! Perhaps you belong to a far off place and you are not aware of the conditions of these places. All right, let me come to your point, my dear young man, I am delighted to converse with you, for you are just of my age and of an admirable department. All whose orders do I require to collect God's gifts? Do I require the permission and orders of human beings to collect the gifts meant for God? I have obtained sanction from God Himself! I am God's devotee and any decision I take with the spirit of surrender - selflessness-service is God's decision. I am not using even a single pie out of these collected gifts for myself, for my existence and for my comforts. I spend all to give comforts to God's devotees, to the pilgrims coming from distant places, to the poor and to the needy. Do you understand? Are you now satisfied, young man? Open the box soon and place on the ground here at my feet all the gifts of gold and silver keeping the required money with you for your expenses at Sreerangam and for your return journey quick!" Thirumangai stood with a smile.

The young bride stood near, all the while, keeping her left hand on her lean waist and the pointing finger of the right hand under her tiny chin, in a spirit of calm and composure with all suppressed and controlled feelings of expression! She had been gazing silently with lips compressed, at all that was going on between her husband and the young robberchief.

The young man opened the box and removed from it all the golden and silver ornaments meant for God, and the

money also. He asked Thirumangai, "I have placed here on the ground before you all my wealth. You give me with your own hands some money required for my expenses at Sreerangam and for our return journey, Thirumangai then put into his hands a reasonable amount of money. The young man expressed another desire in a gentle and pleading tone, "I had the desire to offer personally all these gifts at God's feet at Sreerangam and to experience the pleasure and satisfaction of having done so. Now I have given away all of them to you, how can I approach God's lotus feet empty handed? Will you kindly give me one small golden jewel to enable me to put it at God's feet myself and to have that pleasure and satisfaction?" Thirumangai at once and with a smile of willingness put a small golden ring in the hands of the young man, and handed over all the other wealth to his men, who just joined him with other exploits at other places, and bid two of them to hand over them to the manager in-charge of Thiruvaradhana (santharpana).

The young couple started their journey, but turned back after putting two or three paces as if they had forgotten something, while Thirumangai was still standing there with his men.

Said the young man to Thirumangai in an anxious tone, "Sir, I entertain a small judicious doubt. Will you kindly clear it? Let me confess to you that I had previous information about thieves in the forest on the way to Sreerangam. I was advised not to travel alone but to join a big band of pilgrims to ensure safety. But I was not frightened at such cautions and I continued my journey alone. What all I had in my box, I had decided to offer to Sreeranganatha I was not to use any portion of the wealth in the box. All that was God's. It was all God's will what ever happened. I was nothing to lose myself. With this mode of thinking and determination, and without any fear of danger, I continued my journey accompanied by this one single soul, my wife.

It is a fact that I observed that some pilgrims, who had heard about robbers in the forest, turned back to their places abandoning the idea of pilgrimage to Sreerangam, for they preferred a safe journey back to their homes and to their kith and kin. Don't you think, sir, to that extent the number of pilgrims to Sreerangam got diminished, and to that extent gifts and offerings to Sreeranganatha reduced? They might have found fault with Lord Sreeranganatha for His inability to keep the pilgrimage routes to Sreerangam free from robbers and dangers.

If conditions like this continued for some days more, can you expect any pilgrims to Sreerangam? If pilgrims diminish awfully in number, offering to Sreeranganatha will diminish drastically and come to zero in the end. If there will be no pilgrims and offerings to Sreeranganatha, how can the temple activities and temple performances and worships (Daiva Kainkaryas) continue in the same scale and splendour as now? In course of time the splendour of Sreeranganatha may diminish drastically without pilgrims, without offerings and without worships, not to speak of procession and other attractive programmes. When all God's activities and temple activities come to a stand still, what about the fate of your activities and programmes of Thiruvadaradhana? Sreerangam ultimately may cease to be a pilgrim centre of sacred shrine. You will be indirectly paving the way for this dreary end. This is what I feel; and I have just expressed my feelings. It is left to you to ponder over it a little. It is your will. I have spoken to you too long beyond my limits, I suppose. Please excuse me". So saying the young man left the place rather briskly with his consort.

That night when Thirumangai was abed peacefully after supper, all his day's experiences, chiefly those with the young couple, came to his mind. The style of conversation, self assertion, boldness, piety and cheer of the young man, when recollected, afforded a renewed startle to his thinking mind. He recollected all his boyhood days, his attempt to

win the hand of Kumudavalli and his later activities of plundering the pilgrims and feeding the Vaishnava devotees and his thoughtlessness about the future prospects or rather lack of prospects of Sreerangam temple etc.

He fell in a deep long reverie - "There is truth in what the young man said. The young couple are no other than Sremannarayana and Srimahalakshmi, Geethacharya Krishna and Satya Devi who came to deliver me from ignorance. I am grateful to them for the enlightenment given. If I continue my present activity any longer, the number of pilgrims to Sreerangam is sure diminish. Even by now I find some decrease in the usual number of pilgrims from distant places; there is every danger of Sreerangam's prominence diminishing. Afterall, the name and fame, the splendour and sacredness of a shrine depends upon the number of pilgrims and devotees visiting the shrine and worshipping God in the shrine. If nobody visits a temple except its priest, can it be called a sacred shrine? If no offering and rich gifts in large numbers are not made at Sreeranganatha temple, how can the Nithya Kaikaryas (the daily activities and performances of worship and prayer) be celebrated in the temple? In that case what about the splendour of Sreeranganatha? The result will be utter disappointment to pilgrims and devotees.

Hence I should not commit any more of this sin, this offence and this thoughtless action of robbing the pilgrims. I repent for my offence, and for the atonement of the offence so far committed, I shall get into the towns and villages, approach the wealthy people, collect huge subscription and donations from them and try to render unique and splendid service to the temple of Lord Sreeranganatha: God's sanctum sanctorum is at present in a decaying and half dilapidated condition in corners and at some specific points; let me first renovate it. There is no compound wall at present for the temple; I shall construct it. To the extent possible, I shall

dedicate all my future life for all new constructions required to make the temple a splendid complex. This shall be my invincible determination, which I will translate into action".

Thirumangai never had a wink of sleep that night. He rose up from bed early in the morning. He rode to the forest and assembled all his followers at the meeting place, and addressed them thus, "My dear brethren in service! You have all served me faithfully all these days. To-day I am renouncing from this activity. I am closing down the Daily Thiruvaradhana programme. I am shifting myself to Sreerangam, where I wish to lead to rest of my life in service of Lord Sreeranganatha. You please renounce from this activity. Take honest occupations and lead peaceful lives with your parents and if you are married. Try to see me once at Sreerangam, not early, but after some time, as a devotee in the service of the Lord. I bless you; I take leave of you; Good bye.....".

Thirumangai then went to the place of daily Thiruvaradhana programmes and gave his valedictory speech to all the Vaishnava devotees, who after learning about his future plans, blessed him profusely.

Then Thirumangai, whose love of Kumudavalli completely turned into love of Sreeranganatha, came to Kumudavalli and prostrated at her feet to her utter astonishment and to the astonishment of her old foster parents. Said he to Kumudavalli, "My dear sister! I have renounced all the domestic and princely activities. I have become Sarva Sanga Parithyagi (renouncer of all social contacts), and I have decided to spend the rest of my life in the service of Lord Sreeranganatha. You are responsible for my present renunciation and spiritual enlightenment. I am now lonely proceeding to Sreerangam to translate my plans into action. Bless me, my sister". So saying Thirumangai stood with folded hands while tears of repentance, gratitude and rejuvenated joy and hope rolled down in showers.

Kumudavalli prostrated on the feet of Thirumangai, rose up and stood a while in surprise and joy. She thanked Lord Sreeranganatha for the change in Thirumangai and for the fulfillment of her desire. She said to Thirumangai with folded hands, "Dear Brother, what I desired and prayed for has happened. Both of us are blessed. It is all God's grace! Ranganatha has received both of us, sister and brother, as his blessed devotees. Our desires and aspirations now are quite identical. Like brother and sister, we dedicate ourselves to the services of Sreeranganatha and make our lives fruitful. Brother, you proceed to Sreerangam now as per your decision. I shall soon join you as your disciple at Sreeranganatha shrine. My foster parents are very old and they require my personal attention. I am their only kin. They intend shifting to Sreerangam to have their happy end at the lotus feet of Ranganatha. Of course I have to be with them till their last moment of breathing. I shall immediately join you and the band of your disciples and God's devotees at Sreerangam. In our happiness, bliss and dedication to the Lord, we feel we are participants in this wide universe. Let Sreeranganatha's temple be our society, our world. Brother, may Lord Sreeranganatha shower his choicest blessing on you, and may all your plans, schemes and projects to glorify God and his temple at Sreerangam become successful good bye".

Soon Thirumangai reached Sreerangam. He was then twenty five years old. And he lived there in the service of Sreeranganatha till his end in his eighty fifth year.

On reaching Sreerangam on the first day, he took his bath in the sacred Kaveri, wore on his face the broad and bright Urdhva Pundra marks of white and red and worshipped Sreeranganatha at the sanctum sanctorum. He then examined and surveyed the temple and its precincts: It was a small temple in a dilapidated condition at the corner. There was no compound wall, nor any other gate like thing. There was not any Galigopuram (steeple; a windy tower over

a temple gate). It was only the Mulavirat (The chief idol in the sanctum sanctorum) that was the symbolic representation of the universe and the universal swataining force which was attracting the devotees and the pilgrims from far off places. He felt sorry that such a splendid idol (Archavathara) depicting such a universal ideal of truth should not have been properly sheltered and accomplished.

He sat in a corner of the temple in deep contemplation "I must first renovate the present sanctum sanctorum; I must enlarge the temple on all sides. I must construct a compound wall with wide gates on four sides with lofty Galigopurams. For this huge and holy project I require much money. I shall approach rich landlords, rich zamindars and rich merchants and businessmen and collect donations and subscriptions. I shall fulfil my project".

The next day he approached some rich people of neighbouring villages for subscriptions. But he met with only disappointment and insults. The rich landlords and merchants, when Thirumangai approached, laughed at him in scorn and said, "Oh, you have now adopted this plan to deceive the people! We have information and rumours that you have been a thief and a robber all these days on the forest highways. Now you have chosen this deceitful plan to collect money in the name of the God and in the name of renovation of the temple. You, Pattenamala Vaishnava! (patte Namala = Broad urdhva pundra marks)". They laughed at Thirumangai and slighted him in words scorn and ridicule.

Thirumangai felt highly humiliated. The ridicules and insults were too much for him to bear. He was touched to the quick. He openly declared, "I am not a thief; I was never a thief; I never stole anything for my personal ends; you are unsympathetic enough not to understand my pious sincerity. You call me a thief! All right, I shall show you how this thief is going to renovate the temple. You are cruel hearted - you don't give charities to the poor or for good causes. In that

case what shall be the fate of your self - you will soon know it". The rich landlords and the merchants, who had insulted Thirumangai and who then heard his words were stunned and observed silence.

Thirumangai walked towards Sreerangam. He crossed the Kaveri river and reached the Sreerangam - side sandy bank of the river. He was mentally overwhelmed as to what to do and how to get his pious aspirations accomplished. He sat calmly under a shady tree in the hot sun and was in a pensive mood with his head bent low.

Just then four young men bubbling with youth, vigour, and joy came to Thirumangai, perhaps to sit for just for sometime in the shade of the tree. Thirumangai, who was sweating with fatigue and disgust then, raised his head slowly, and seeing them, he asked, "Who are you, young men? Perhaps you have come here like me to take shelter in the shade of this tree. Please sit down. May I know who you are?"

Some how the four young men were fascinated to see the young, energetic and beautiful person, Thirumangai with a pious symbol of bright broad Urdhva Pundra marks on his forehead. All the four felt a feeling of sympathy, love and regard for Thirumangai, at the first sight. They leisurely sat before him and began to introduce themselves to Thirumangai.

One young man said, "I am Tholavalakkam by name. I am a great logician. "I am commence conversation with any person, he can never leave me and continues listening to me in rapt attention; he will sit motionless like a log and can't mind what is going around him. Such is my skill in talking and I am prepared to serve you if you accept me as your follower".

The second young man said, "My name is Thaluduvan. I have the capacity and skill to open any lock without the

key and without breaking it with any tool. I can blow air into it and unlock it. Again I can lock it without the key by blowing air into it with my mouth. I require no key or tool to lock and to unlock any lock. This is my special capacity and I am prepared to be your follower, if you give your acceptance."

The third individual began thus, "I am called Neelavai Midippan. I can stop any person to remain with me. Even if I put my foot on the shadow of a person, he cannot move. This is my ability and I am also ready to serve you, if you want."

The fourth man said, "My name is Nirmelnadappan. I can walk on the surface of the water as we walk on the land. I am prepared to become your pupil and to serve you."

Thirumangai felt their words strange, humorous, interesting and refreshing. He was relieved a little from his pentup feelings. He felt amused to talk to them, "My dear young friends! I am surprised why you are readily coming forward of your own accord to become my followers or disciples! You don't know anything about me; you have not seen me before; I want to know about your biographies further".

All the four young men in one voice began to speak thus, "Swami! We know quite well about you. You are the Thirumangai who has been running the Thiruvadaradhana programme for the last few months near the forest on the way to Sreerangam. We had the occasion to enjoy the feasts there several times. The Vaishnava devotees, the pilgrims and many others have had the benefit of food and shelter at the place of Santharpana, organized by you. We know your spirit of selflessness, your piety and your service to the devotees, the pilgrims and the poor. Just two days ago, we had the news that you have become Sarvasanga parithyagi and that you have come away to Sreerangam to spend the rest of your life at the lotus feet of Sreeranganatha. We know about you quite well, benevolent swami; How can we praise you, who was born in a royal family, who has spent all his

wealth in the service of the devotees, who has given up his kingdom and kingship to become Sarvasangha parithyagi in service to God Ranganatha!

Regarding our biographies, they are mean and we feel ashamed to describe them to you, O noble sir. We were born in different places, and in course of time, a few years ago we came together and became collaborators in our common occupation of stealing. We are a band of four veteran and notorious thieves. We are unmarried and our bellies and pleasures are our only concern. We don't remember yesterdays, and we don't mind tomorrows. All the rich people in these parts know that we are thieves. But nobody could do anything to us, for nobody could detect us in the act. Ofcourse it is impossible for anybody to detect us in the act; further nobody has the boldness to attempt to catch us. Why, people are afraid of us, and they hesitate to interrogate us or to have any contacts with us. We move among people as unfamiliar ones. Rich people and merchants are damn-afraid of us, for if any rich man incurs displeasure, he suspects that theft would be committed by us in his house, and despite all knowledge and prior warnings, we cannot be detected in the act. The result will be a sure loss for him, and he will have to receive it in silence for fear of further theft. We have never been caught in the act so far and we shall not be detected in future. We have already at the outset described to you our skills and capacities.

This is our story in brief, swami! These four big fishes are caught only now in your net, swami! We shall also become Sarvasanga parithyagi's now, and follow you as your disciples. We dedicate ourselves to you and to Sreeranganatha. We remain with you all our life in the service of the Lord at Sreerangam. This is our decision and aspiration. Kindly receive us into your parental lap. Wash off our sins with your blessings".

So saying all the four prostrated at the feet of Thirumangai with tears of repentances in their eyes. The kind and sympathetic Thirumangai raised them from the ground and blessed them that they would turn righteous and pious. He openly and cheerfully declared that they would be the first set of his followers or disciples.

Said Thirumangai to them, "My dear followers, your spirit of repentance has washed you off all your sins. Repentance is the noblest and purest stream, a bath in which gives you purity of mind word and deed. Repentance is a result of the self awareness of truth. Repentance leads you to the spirit of surrender, which in turn leads you to the spirit of selflessness, which in turn prompts you to a life of service. You are blessed, and I keep you always with me as my followers and assistants".

Thus imparting them ways of spirituality, blessing them and encouraging them, Thirumangai continued, "Dear young men, I believe that you shall be of immense help to me, a help which cannot be described or estimated. From this moment of repentance you are no more thieves. You are blessed young men. You are pure and bright minded souls. But listen to me closely: I have now to employ you to commit ten thefts: Don't be bewildered; understand my plan well. I employ you now for acts of stealing at night not for any selfish gains, but to teach a lesson to the wicked, proud and miserly landlords and merchants who have today insulted me, ridiculed me and spoke ill of the Vaishnava devotees. This is just for common welfare (Loka Kalyana); mind you, my dear ardent followers". Thirumangai was often hesitating, was now and then uttering broken speech in trying to convince them.

All the four in one voice said, "Swami, we are your disciples, followers, assistants and slaves (Dasas). We have surrendered to you and we have dedicated ourselves to you. You are the sole resort and succour to us. We don't have any other resort or shelter. We don't exercise any discretion. Our

sole duty is to follow your instruction implicitly. We are not concerned with examining your instructions. We are not concerned with their outcome. We are dumb but active creatures in all readiness. We surrender to you and our welfare is your concern, not ours." Concluding thus they stood before Thirumangai in folded arms to signify their implicit readiness to implement their Guru's orders and instruction.

Said Thirumangai to them in a disposition of calm contemplation, "you have told me just now that the rich people might be, secretly among themselves, considering you as the wicked gang of four (Dushta Chathushtayam - Dushta = wicked, Chathushtayam = four) following me and implementing my instructions, you shall be soon recognized by all as Sishta Chathushtayam (sishta=virtuous; chathushtayam=four = the virtuous group of four). Look here, listen to me well: I have thought of a master plan to renovate Sreeranganatha temple, to construct compound walls with Galigopurams and to accomplish the temple complex in so many magnificent ways. For the present I have thought of a minimum programme of renovating the present Garbha Gudi (Sanctum sanctorum) and to construct a compound wall, which are immediate, bare and inevitable necessities.

Explaining this my programme, I approached some landlords, some rich merchants and some high officials for donations, who ridiculed me, mocked at me and insulted me calling me hypocrite with Urdhva Pundras. What could I do when they cared not to hear me, and when they began to insult me with all allegations, I came away here in silence and I have been sitting here thinking of what to do, when you came to me fortunately for us all. All of them who insulted me are corrupt to the core who amass pelf in plenty exploiting the common and innocent people. They are leeches sucking the blood of the poor and the ignorant. I have taken a vow to collect donations from these very people and from people of their class and tendencies, and to translate my plans.

I and you together have to play a small drama tonight: I shall send word to them, who have insulted me. This afternoon itself that as they had called me thief, I would see that their gold and silver will be stolen this night itself. I am sure my word will prove true with your assistance and cooperation. With one incident of theft tonight despite all their precautions, which ofcourse prove futile with you, they shall become be wildered and helpless. They shall be forced to approach me myself, for future protection and safety. They shall know that you four are my disciples; In that case their fears shall be unlimited. They shall be forced to approach me and request for pardon for ridiculing and insulting me and similar devotees of God. They shall realize the truth of my programmes and projects. They shall come with voluntary donations later not out of fear, but out of piety. They are sure to be reformed. This is the drama to be enacted. Your four are actors; I am just the director".

Thus Thirumangai concluded his convincing and interesting speech, and all the four young men exclaimed aloud, "A splendid master plan, swami; we are your slaves, willing servants. It is all your will, your will shall be done. We shall execute the plan tonight itself. Bless us, O kind swami".

The four young men, Thirumangai's followers, that night entered the houses of four or five rich men, who had insulted Thirumangai, and stole quite a good number of gold and silver ornaments of huge amount and heaped them up just at the gate out side the sanctum sanctorum of Sreeranganatha temple, and by dawn they informed Thirumangai on his bed what they had done.

It was morning, the rich man, who had arranged good guard during the night woke up and eagerly examined the locks of their safe rooms. They were glad that the locks of the gates of the rooms as well as the locks of the iron safes within were all in tact. But later when they opened the locks

of the iron safes, they were all empty and not a jewel of gold or silver and not a diamond could be found in the boxes. What was their surprise and what was their sorrow! There was not even a trace of an person having entering the rooms; but all their treasures disappeared. By sunrise there were crowds of people at those four or five rich houses from which the mysterious thefts were committed.

Just then one of the four followers of Thirumangai Tholavalakkan, came there with a news, "O, rich gentlemen, don't think that your wealth has been stolen away by thieves. All your treasures, golden ornaments, silver ornaments, precious stones and cash are found in heaps at the gate of sanctum sanctorum of Sreeranganatha. Our Guru, Thirumangai is there sitting at the heaps of wealth, keeping watch over them. Every one of your belongings is there in safe custody of our guru. You need not be afraid and you need not be sad. Ofcourse, you can't but be dismayed. You can immediately go there, establish your identify as the rightful owners of the ornaments and receive them. Hasten! I come here with this word from our Guru, Thirumangai. Come on, follow me!"

What was the dismay of those rich people and all the common folk and their servants that gathered there! The rich people, four or five in number, who were the losers, ran in haste and anxiety to the temple. Crowds of people followed them. Tholavalakkan, in front of all, was like the engine of a long train. By the time they reached the temple, there had been already huge groups of people watching the scene in astonishment at the temple gate. The priests of the temple stood there in wonder. Thirumangai was sitting there on the ground near the heaps of wealth in Padmasana (a particular sitting posture, with both legs folded and touching the ground, assumed by Hindus in religious meditation or thapas = the sitting posture of a Hindu Rishi in Penance). He was, in low voice, uttering the Sahasranāma Sthōthra of Lord Vishnu

(The thousand names of God of Bhishma sthuthi of Mahabharatha), with closed eyes unconscious of the surroundings. All were standing in silence filled with awe and wonder. Thirumangai opened his eyes wide, and then looked at the rich men (the losers) who felt ashamed even to look at Thirumangai, for they had already by then realized their folly and the wrong they had committed to God and the Devotee (Daiva- Bhāgavathāparādhm).

Said Thirumangai in solemn words of joy, with urdhva pundras on the forehead and a pious and prayerful mind within, was beaming with light and truth, "O! gentlemen, your health is here at the feet of the Lord, who has been keeping close watch over it. How kind God Ranganatha is to you to have acted as your servant and guard all the night! It is all His grace! If He gives orders; you can now carry back your wealth to your dark dungeons of treasure - rooms. The treasure room of a miser is a dark dungeon; that of a benevolent gentleman is a bright light. You go and lead mean lives of miserliness; it is not known when Hariprabōdhams (the wisdom of annihilating sins) will dawn on you and prompt you to brighter ways of life of charity, kindness and love. Go!" Thirumangai uttered these words not in scars, but in love and concern for them. All the spectators were witnessing the scene with eyes and mouths wide open.

The rich men (the losers), who realized their faults, deeply repented, and fell flat on the feet of Thirumangai in utter surrender, and submitted with shivering folded hands and trembling lips, "pardon us swami, we are sinners in calling you a thief and a hypocrite. We failed to understand your piety and the sincerity of your purpose to renovate the temple. We request you humbly to excuse us and to lead us to light and truth. We are not taking back these items of wealth. They no longer belong to us. They are yours, and they are God's! We offer all these as gifts to Lord Sreeranganatha through you, who is His messenger and prophet. Please receive them, and receive us as God's

devotees and as your disciples, followers and servants (Dasas = persons in service). We cooperate with you in all your efforts to glorify God and His temple. We shall give further donations to the extent possible and we shall propagate among people for the offer of donations for temple renovations. We follow you in your efforts to collect donations." Saying this they prostrated at the feet of the Thirumangai in utter surrender (Sarangathi Bhava).

From this incident onwards the number of disciples of Thirumangai increased thousand fold. Pilgrims to Sreerangam from all parts of the country multiplied thousand fold. Donations were offered in streams to Thirumangai to carry on his projects of renovations and fresh constructions to the temple. Thirumangai appointed accountants and managers to account for items of incomes and expenditure; they were not employees working on salaries; they were devotees who had dedicated themselves to the services of Thirumangai. Everything was going on systematically and all the people, rich and poor around Sreerangam, and all the devotees and pilgrims from all distant places, were much impressed with Thirumangai's project, and generously praised and encouraged him.

Most of the tribal men of the forest regions, who had been the followers of Thirumangai previously in robbing the rich pilgrims and merchants on the way to Sreerangam, and most of the men whose professions were wicked ways of committing thefts, came to learn about the reformation brought about in the life and activities of Thirumangai and the great reformation which Thirumangai brought about in the multitudes of people and pilgrims by his teachings and by his personal example of dedication to the services of God and devotees.

All of them, some with families, came to Sreerangam in large crowds and surrendered to Thirumangai saying, "swami, till now we have been thieves and robbers. Till now

we have been selfish, ignorant and wicked. We are worst sinners. We have come here having learnt how you are engaged in the service of God (Daiva Kainkaryam). From this moment we are no longer thieves and robbers. We are your disciples, followers and servants. We are capable of hard physical labour, we assist you in the renovations and constructions of the temple and compound walls. We have decided never to leave Sreerangam. We are Sarvasanga Parithyagis, as you are, and we dedicate our lives and services to you and Sreeranganatha. We don't want wages; we don't want any earnings; we live upon the temple prasadam (the food given in the temple) and work here as you bid us to do. O, swami, receive us and bless us". So saying, they bitterly wept in repentance.

The ocean of mercy and kindness, as Thirumangai was, sympathized and blessed them. Said Thirumangai to them, "you are really blessed, for you have expressed repentance for your past evil actions. Though you had committed evil actions in the past, you are now repenting and surrendering to God. This is what you can do, and what you should do. You have become selfless; selflessness is the best bath of the purification of the soul, not hypocritical piety, and prayers. Without education, scholarship and erudition, you have, by your personal awareness, awakening and realization and repentances, reached the highest plane of life, Paramapa'ā, which the so called learned men could not attain with their impurities of selfishness. You are purified, you are reformed, and you are blessed! You are selfless, and sins can't approach you. Selflessness is the enemy of sins. You are free from bondage. With the spirit of the All-pervading divine force, Vishnu and remain here with the spirit of universal brotherhood here at the feet of Sreeranganatha without distinctions of caste and class. You are hard workers and you have dedicated yourselves to the service of the Lord. You shall not have any needs and anxieties from now. You don't

feel the anxieties of the morrow. You are not poor craving for something; you are not the cursed rich bearing the burden of pelf. I am one among you. Your elder brother. We shall enjoy our lives here in the service of the Lord".

As Thirumangai concluded his speech of mercy and blessings, they trembled with mingled feelings of piety, satisfaction and joy; their hair stood on end. They stood gazing in a splendour of rejoicing and uttered, see how the spirit of reformation in Thirumangai not only purified him but also how it elevated so many other souls from the depths of sin. This is the property and influence of great souls (Great soul = pavitrāthma = mahānubhava = a person of great experience of wisdom). It is in the hands of such Mahanubhavas that the welfare of the world (Lōka Kalyānam) rests. The Mahanubhavas are so powerful, mystically powerful. He is a real sacred person who instills goodness in others by his own personal example of goodness. The powers of practice and precept were embedded in Thirumangai; that made him leader of multitude of souls; that made him victorious in his schemes of most unexpected prospects of his attempts to renovations and constructions of temples.

With the help of huge, unending offer of donations from pilgrims, devotees, general public, rich merchants, landlords and kings, Thirumangai started the work of renovations and constructions relating to the temple of Sreeranganatha. Employing several experts in techtonics, sculpture, arts and painting, so many carpenters and smiths, so many masons and workers, Thirumangai was successful in quick out turn of work. The clerks, accountants and supervisors discharged their duties effectively. All these workers, thousands in number, were his disciples and followers, and not employees. There were large number of cooks and servers who served food to all these workers. The donations were in gold, cash and kind.

At first, the sanctum sanctorum (Garbhagudi) was renovated and reconstructed, on which golden spires were installed. A vast space was left all around the Garbhagudi and a grand and huge compound wall was constructed covering the four sides with wide gates on four sides with one Galigopuram (windy tower) on each gate. Golden spires were installed on the top of each Galigopuram. Now the area within the compound wall around the sanctum sanctorum was so vast that it could hold lakhs of pilgrims at a time. Stone slabs were spread over the whole area. Now the temple acquired its beauty, grandeur and splendour and it is a happy and admirable sight to all pilgrims and devotees. Later seven compound walls were constructed on the whole, keeping a very wide space of about a furlong between one compound wall and the other; and for each compound wall there were gates on four sides with a lofty windy tower on each gate. There were golden spires on the top of each Galigopuram. If a person stands at the gate of the seventh compound wall outside, he could see all the other six gates in one straight line.

Gradually so many smaller temples were constructed within the temple area along the four sides of the first compound wall. Many Storie Mantapas (Mantapa = An open hall with tall stone pillars in a temple) were erected. The Sahasra Stambha Mantapa (The Mantapa with one thousand stone pillars) was an object of wonder. All walls, all stone pillars (why every inch of space anywhere on any structure) are pieces of sculpture or painting, enlightening the spectators on epic stories.

Sreerangam became an abode of innumerable experts in tectonics, sculpture and other arts pertaining to construction of temples. There was employment to thousands of workers of all skills and labour during the construction. All felt amazed at the splendid project carried on by Thirumangai. People knew about the truth and greatness of Thirumangai, who was moving about the temple in Vishnu

Samslesha Bhava singing songs in praise of God in a state of Paramananda (Bliss). Donations were increasing day by day.

Another wonder was, all the erstwhile thieves and robbers became the followers and disciples of Thirumangai. The miserly merchants and rich landlords, in the interest of their own safety, were paying regular subscription to incur the pleasure of Thirumangai and his staff; or they did not or could not afford to incur their displeasure; this is about the less intelligent and wise who were not expected to become so pure so soon. A stage had come that donation and subscriptions were coming to Thirumangai without his asking. Donations became a regular feature just as offerings to God in sanctum sanctorum. Thousands of workers and common people were one with Thirumangai, with bright urdhva pundra marks on their faces, working during day in temple construction and singing in concerts, pious songs in praise of God, which were compositions of Thirumangai himself. It was a wonderful sight every morning for pilgrims to see Thirumangai walking to the temple after bath in the sacred Kaveri followed by thousands of his followers and workers and devotees, with bright urdhva pundra marks on their foreheads, singing songs in praise of Lord Sri Ranganatha.

All-one and all, acclaimed Thirumangai as Thirumangai Alvar.

Thirumangai Alvar was unique not only in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava and a state of bliss, but also in the efficiency of getting God's work done with the cooperation of fellowmen. This was a speciality with this Alvar. Besides, he was a great poet, a great scholar, and a great composer of innumerable pasuras and songs of philosophical and pious nature.

Thirumangai was a great scholar and poet in Sanskrit and Tamil; but he opted to produce more compositions in Tamil for the benefit of all people. Though involved whole

time in such stupendous projects of the temple renovations and constructions, he could spare time, a little during day time and more at nights, to produce six valuable Prabandhas and about one thousand songs in praise of God. He made his followers and temple construction workers sing these songs in concerts along with him in the evenings. The pilgrims also joined the musical concerts.

His Shatprabandhas (six Prabandhas) were Periya Thirumoli, Thirukkurun dandakam, Thirunedun dandakam, Thiruvelu kuttirukkai, Siriya Thirumadal and Periya Thirumadal.

He exhibited in his literary and philosophical compositions four types of poetic skills, namely, Asu Madhuram, Chithram and Vistaram. (Extempore, Love, description and narrative explanatory). That was why he was called Chathushkavi Sikhamani.

Such was the unique personality of Thirumangai Alvar. Sreeranganatha temple rose to its highest splendour in his time, which continues ever today as the most important temple in the south.

Thirumangai Alvar came to Sreerangam at a tender age of twenty five years and he took a period of sixty long years to complete all his projects of renovations and constructions of Sreeranganatha temple. In his eighty fifth year Thirumangai had the fullest satisfaction of having achieved his life's purpose, namely glorifying Sreeranganatha with unique temples and worships and with his splendid compositions of prabandhas, pasuras and songs.

In his life time Thirumangai Alvar was able to turn Sreerangam into Bhuloka Vaikuntham, which was his desire and aim. In between any two compound walls, a furlong apart, lines of dwelling houses facing each other soon developed. Sreerangam became a temple city in the time of Thirumangai Alvar, who was a great planner.

The temple city of Sreerangam (which is a municipality today) with its sacred shrine, with huge and lofty windy towers glittering with golden spires on the top, with its huge seven square streets, with parks and gardens on the lakes of Kaveri river on either side, with its daily splendour of worship and professions, with its streams of pilgrims and devotees, with visitors all over the country and abroad etc is even today a wonder of the world.

All this splendour of Sreerangam was due to the eminence and services of Thirumangai Alvar who breathed his last in Sreerangam temple itself, amidst his disciples, with smiles on his lips and a satisfaction in his mind that he had achieved his life's fulfillment.

"Vadinen" a chapter in Thirumangai Alvar's Periya Thirumoli, is famous for its exposition of Thirumanthra Vaibhavam (The splendour of Thirumanthra or Ashtakshari manthra), which I have dealt with separately for the benefit of readers in my other book, "Sribhakthisara". Another chapter of ten pasuras in the same book on how Thirumangai Alvar had praised Lord Thirumalēsa, who by me dealt with in detail, for the benefit of ardent readers, in my other book, Tirumala Tirupati Vēṅkatēswara Divya Vaibhavam".

It was on account of the splendour of Sreerangam as a great Vaishnava pilgrim centre, brought about by Thirumangai Alvar, that in later times, in tenth and eleventh centuries A.D. the great Vaishnavacharya, Srinadamuni and his grandson Yamunacharya (a prodigy and genius in learning and philosophy) started at Sreerangam, Sreevaishnava Muth and Sree Visishtadvaita Muth respectively. Sreeramunja (1017 A.D. to 1137 A.D.) succeeded Yamunacharya (Alavandar) to the headship of Visishtadvaita Muth, propounded and propagated Visishtadvaita Siddhanta. These three are called Munitrayam or Acharyatrayam in the history of Vaishnava

Visishtadvaita philosophy, a full account on whom the ardent readers can get in my other book, Sriramanuja Divya Vaibhavam.

The devotees and Acharyas of later times recognized the greatness, worth and services of Thirumangai Alvar and composed pasuras in Tamil and slokas in English praising him and expressing their respect and devotion:

At the outset, in the Thirunakshatra sloka, we have learnt that Thirumangai Alvar is called, in Dravida Prabandha, Chathushkavisikhamani, and Shatprabandha Krithikartha.

A Sanskrit sloka from Divya Suri Charitham runs thus:

**"Parakāla Harim Vandē
Haripādaguḥāsayam|
Unnatha Prāthikūlēbha
Kumbha Sambhēda Vibhramam"||**

Substance: "I bow in salutation to the Lion, Parakala, lying in the den of Vishnu's Lotus feet, who had broken the forehead of the elephant of superstitions and ignorance (which are the enemies of mankind)".

(Parakala was another name or title of Thirumangai Alvar).

Thirukkottiyur Nambi (Goshthipurna, one of the Acharyas of Sreeramanuja, who revealed to Sreeramanuja the Thirumanthra as per the instructions of Yamunacharya) gave the following Sanskrit sloka praising Thirumangai Alvar:

**"Kalayām Kalidhvamsam
Kavim lōka divākaram|
Yasya gōbhihi prakāsābhihi
Avidyām nihathām thāmaha||"**

Substance: "I worship Thirumangai Alvar, the saint poet, who puts an end of humanitys ignorance, who protects people from sins, and who is the bright sun dispelling the darkness of ignorance with his Gospel".

Sree Ramanuja, inspired by the Prabandhas of Thirumangai Alvar, praises him thus in a Tamil pasura:

"May the weapon of Gospel of Thirumangai Alvar (the purest in mind, word and deed, who was death to man's foes, superstitions and sins, who was born to bless the people of Thirummuraiyalur and Thirumangai, who acquired the wisdom of Thirumanthra by his own intuition through his efficiency of thinking and acting) prosper for ever".

Kurattalvar (Kuresa), one of the first batch of the three disciples of Ramanuja, the other two being Govinda (Embar) and Dasarathi (Mudaliyandar), praises the power and splendour of the pasuras of Thirumangai Alvar in a Tamil pasura, the substance of which is given below:

The pasuras of Thirumangai Alvar, the death of man's enemies of superstitions beliefs, are really light dispelling the darkness of ignorance, ambrosia for the poison of life and death concept, the guiding principle for the "Pancha Lakshna Marga of Dravida Vēda" (i.e. the Pāṇḍya Rāthra Āgama Ġnāna = The five wise ways for salvation), the essence of all veidic knowledge and burning fire to the superstitious beliefs existing among men for ages".

Embar (Govinda) Ramanuja's disciple in a Tamil pasura observes thus:

"Oh, Sriramanujacharya! The protector of the religious destitute! O, the saviour of our souls! O, Ramanuja who has clarified all doubts in the scriptures and who has received all as his followers! O, Yathiraja, kindly grant this to your humble disciple a strong mind and a stout heart to receive and sustain

the wisdom of Periya Thirumoli of the Great famous Thirumangai Alvar".

(The gist in brief is - "O Ramanuja! Teach me the wisdom of Thirumangai Alvar's Periya Thirumoli)

Thirumangai Alvar was a unique combination of Alvar, scholar, poet, writer, organizer and worker in one.



9. Periyālvār & Āndāl

The biographies of the two Alvars - Periyalvar and Andal, were intertwined, for they were father and daughter. They are famous in Dravida Divya Veda (The Tamil Vaishnava Scriptures) for their productions, Thiruppallandu and Thiruppavi respectively.

It is not known what name Periyalvar was given originally by his parents in his infancy, but people called him Vishnu Chittha from his boyhood onwards as he was found always moving about the Srikrishna temple of Srivilliputtur and the temple Thulasi garden singing in praise of Lord Vishnu (The omnipresent) in an emotional "feeling of oneness with the universe and the universal sustaining force" (Vishnu Samslesha Bhava). Vishnu + Chittha = The Omnipresent + Mind = Thinking of the Omnipresent always in mind = "The person who always kept Lord Vishnu in mind" = "The person who always kept Lord Vishnu in mind". He left his parental home even at the age of twelve, and made the temple and the Thulasi garden his abode till he came to middle age, when he shifted to Sreerangam, where he lived till the end of his life in service to Sriranganatha.

The story of how Vishnu Chittha came to treat Andal as his adopted daughter and how he came to be called Periyalvar (Peri-elder) is a wonderful account in Dravida Divya Prabandhas.

The Thirunakshatra sloka of Vishnu Chittha runs thus:

**"Mithunē swathijam vishnō madāmsam dhanvinaha purē |
Prapadyē Swasuram Vishnōh Vishnu Chittham purassikham||"**

Substance: "I bow my head in salutation to Vishnu Chittha, the father-in-law of Lord Vishnu himself, who was born in Mithuna Lagna of Swathi Nakshatra of the month of Ani in the aspect of "Vishnu's Ratha", and who was born to Brahmin parents of Srivilliputtur".

The Dravida Prabandha reveals that the Vaishnava devotees believed that Vishnu Chittha was born in this world in the aspect of the grand and lofty car (Ratha) of Srimaha Vishnu. The devotees and his disciples felt elated and elevated to see Vishnu Chittha just as the devotees and pilgrims felt cheerful and inspired when they witnessed the lofty and splendidly decorated Sriranganathas' Ratha moving in procession slowly with the Lord's Archavathara within.

Vishnu Chittha was an ardent devotee of Lord Sreekrishna, Geethacharya, from his childhood onwards. He was not a great scholar as he did not study under any Guru. But his knowledge and wisdom were profound. He was a swacharya (a self teacher) as any other Alvar was. No Alvar had a teacher, guru or guide: How can you trace the beginning of the Beginning? Where is the Mulam (source). The Sarva Mulam? Who is the creator of The Creator? That was the position of any Alvar! An Alvar was a born genius!

Vishnu Chittha, as a boy, was not in contact with people outside. People only used to see him in the temple and in the Thulasi garden; musing within himself in joyous emotional elation; and people had a great regard for the boy-saint.

It is believed that Vishnu Chittha was born in the beginning of 8th century A.D. when Srivallabhadeva was the Pandya king with South Madhura as his capital. This king was famous for his wisdom, scholarship, scrupulous discharge of his duties and devotion to God.

One night, as was his usual practice, the king in disguise was moving about the streets of the city, with his secret messengers and the minister, just to learn what the people were thinking about their king and government, saw a monk lying on a pial attached to a choultry. When the king questioned him who he was, the monk began to reply thus - "I am a Brahmin monk and a scholar in scriptures and epics.

I am a Sanskrit pandit from Banaras, and I am on my way on a pilgrimage to Rameswaram".

The king was fascinated to hear further from the great Sanskrit pandit of the North and spoke to him thus - "Blessed art thou! Besides being a Brahmin by caste, and a Sanskrit scholar with wide erudition in Vedas, Sasthras and Puranas, you are making country-wide tours visiting sacred places and educational and cultural centres. I consider you as a learned scholar endowed with wisdom and experience. Will you kindly recite a fine sloka which I shall hear with interest?"

The Sanskrit pandit replied, "Is it so! I have in fact stopped here to night to meet the king of this city in his Darbar tomorrow, and the request him to arrange for a discussion on a sloka of my choice, which could not be interpreted so far any where during my country-wide tour. I have learnt that the king of this city is a great and profound scholar, and he must be having learned scholars in his court and in his city and kingdom. I am keeping that unique sloka of mine secretly within, to throw it as a riddle before the king in his Darbar tomorrow. You can also, if you are so much interested in Vedantha, witness the discussion in the royal presence".

"Your idea is very fine! You can do so for the benefit of all. But should I not hear that sloka now from you? Is it so secret that none should hear it before it is announced in the royal court? Why should any knowledge be kept secret?" said the king in disguise.

"Ah, there is no secret about it. I have already told you that I am going to announce it openly in the royal court. I would even allow time of a few days for the king to summon all the pandits to the court, and to enable the pandits to come fully prepared for discussion. If you are so much interested to hear the sloka now itself, I am ready and pleased to express it to you now. It is thus -

Sloka :

**"Varshātha mashtān prayathētha masan
Nisārtha mardham divasam yathētha |
Vardhakya Hethorvayasā navēna
Parathra hēthōriha janmana cha ||"**

Oh, gentleman! You have heard the sloka. Are you satisfied?" Concluding thus, the pandit looked at the listener with an air of joy and pride.

(The substance, or meaning of the sloka is given for the benefit of the readers: *"Gather in summer things needed for winter; collect during daytime things required for the night; earn and keep in store during youth what are necessary for old age; earn in this life what is required for life beyond."*)

Sree Vallabhadeva Raja felt highly pleased with the sloka for the profound implications it embodied. He felt within himself that he should gather comments on the gist of the fourth line of the sloka from all the pandits of his kingdom in an open discussion, and to see that the correct conclusion of the discussions was arrived at. Really it was a gem of a sloka in scriptural literature.

Said the king in disguise to the pandit, "Oh, great pandit! As you had heard the king of this city is known for his interest in philosophical discourses. He will slowly honour you if you seek his interview. Try to meet the king tomorrow itself". The king then left the place with joy and satisfaction.

The next day the Sanskrit pandit of the North met the king of Srevallabhadeva, who received him with due regard and respect. The pandit announced his purpose in seeking the king's interview. He gave out the sloka and requested the king to arrange for a scholarly discussion on it by the pandits of his kingdom; he wanted to know if at all there were pandits in the south capable of explaining the sloka in all its depth of philosophy. The king announced that there

would be a philosophical discussion on the fourth day in the Royal Darbar.

The king took this as a challenge and a prestige issue for him and his kingdom. He felt pained when the Sanskrit pandit of the North expressed his doubts regarding availability of capable and learned scholars in the south to discuss the philosophical implications of the sloka. Further he had a personal interest to learn the wisdom contained in the last line of the small sloka. After all, the first three lines were too simple and easy, within the experience of any person. The hurdle was only in the last line, for which the first three lines cited were three similes.

The king conferred with his palace priest, who was also a great scholar in Sanskrit scriptures, and said "what shall we do to arrange for a seminar on Purushartha Nirnayam?" (Purusha + Artha = Man's + life purposes.) They are four in number, Chaturarthas: 1. Dharma (duty), 2. Artha (wealth), 3. Kama (desires) and 4. Moksha (Bliss or deliverance from sins). Nirnaya = Determination. What should the individual do to achieve the four Purusharthas to attain his life's fulfillment here and to achieve what is required for the beyond. These points were to be discussed by the scholars.

The priest, Selvanambi by name, submitted to the king thus - "we have to summon from our kingdom all the learned and wise scholars and elicit from the treasure of their learning, wisdom and experience, the proper solutions. The tenets are to be determined by them citing the scriptures". The king adopted the suggestions of the priest.

The king fixed up considerably a big amount of money as prize amount to be paid to the best scholar who could explain "Purushartha Nirnaya" to the satisfaction of all pandits.

Sufficiently in advance, before the stipulated day, the priest, Selvanambi tendered an advice to the king, "O, king;

for the judgement of philosophical truth, simple scholarship and logical skill are not enough. It is only a real devotee of God that can arrive at the truth. I feel there are no pandits in our kingdom with such learning and devotion. I humbly submit that I also don't have the required capacities to win the Sanskrit pandit of the North in a debate. My inner conscience tells me that the young saint, by name Vishnu Chittha of Sreevilliputtur will be able to come to the level of the Sanskrit pandit of the North".

The king atonce sent messengers to Vishnu Chittha, requesting him to attend the King's Darbar. The queen was also a learned lady, and evinced interest in philosophical discussion. In one voice the King and the queen said to young Vishnu Chittha, "Oh, great devotee of Srimaha Vishnu! We request you kindly to participate in the philosophical debate. We are sure that you can arrive at the truth of this philosophical riddle and vanquish the pandit of the North. Being a citizen of our kingdom, you must cooperate to keep up the prestige of your king, who is a lover of God's devotees". Vishnu Chittha calmly, "I am young and I am not a learned scholar. What all I know is to worship Lord Krishna. I can't displease the king and queen who are considered as father and mother of the people. I do obey you, O king. All depends on Krishna's grace".

It was the stipulated day for the philosophical debate. The Darbar hall was packed with pandits, scholars, officials and elderly citizens. The king was on his throne with the queen by his order. The Sanskrit pandit of the North and Vishnu Chittha were conspicuously seen seated on the dias facing each other before the king. The pandit of the North was sure that he would win the prize amount, and was sitting in a air of superiority and pride. Young Vishnu Chittha was sitting calmly thinking of Lord SreeKrishna within; he appeared cheerful and alert. The pandit of the North was like a huge elephant in rut while young Vishnu Chittha was

like a Lion's cub. Besides Vishnu Chittha appeared like the Goddess of learning. By the side of the pandit of the North Vishnu Chittha was like a golden ball beside a hay rich.

The debate was inaugurated by the king. The Sanskrit pandit of the North gave out the sloka (already mentioned) in ringing voice, while all other pandits sat dumb founded. There was perfect silence in the Darbar hall. The king waited in eagerness for a while. Continued silence would be a victory to the interrogator. The king did not like to allow this further. He did not like to embarrass any of the pandits of the kingdom by pointing out to rise up and being discussion, for all of them were sitting with bent heads to avoid the king's call. The king sympathized their helpless state. Not knowing what to do at the moment as the presiding officer, the king looked at Selvanambi, his purohit, who in turn looked at young Vishnu Chittha. Immediately the king turned to Vishnu Chittha and said, "Oh, boy saint, Vishnu Chittha, I call upon you to discuss the philosophy contained in the sloka and to enunciate "Purushartha Nirnayam".

While Vishnu Chittha was preparing to stand up, all other poets felt relieved; the pandit of the North felt that all the other pandits were vanquished, and the little boy scholar need not be taken into account; in a short while he would be recipient of the prize amount and all the connected honours. The royal couple were gazing in anxiety; all the spectators in the hall were spellbound in surprise.

Vishnu Chittha opened his sacred mouth, a mouth that had always been uttering Vishnu Sahasra Namas (The thousand auspicious names of God), and began to speak. It was 10 a.m. His musical voice spread the fragrance of learning and wisdom all over the Darbar hall. Vishnu Chittha was a tempest of talk; he was an ocean of wisdom; he was the wide space of knowledge; he was a shower of facts; he was a cyclone of logical arguments; he was a thunderbolt of assertions of authoritative scriptural sentences; and he was

a lightning of pointed quotations. He was like Indra spreading out all his powers. There was no veda, no Upanishad, no epic etc form which he missed to quote. Everybody sat in amazement. The proud pandit of the North was sitting like a devotee in ardent worship. It was 6 p.m. and the sun was about to set. The lamps in the Darbar hall were lighted. The speech of Vishnu Chittha was like the eternal stream. He was growing more energetic and cheerful as he was continuing his speech. It appeared that he would not conclude soon. The Sanskrit pandit of the North sprang up, prostrated at the feet of Vishnu Chittha, saying, "I am blessed to have heard you today. Excuse me for my pride; I am not even a drop before you who is an ocean". He then turned to the king and queen with folded hands, and submitted in all reverence and wonder, "O king, he is not an ordinary human being. He is not simply a boy - saint as you had called him. He is the Goddess of learning, Saraswathi, in this form. He is Bruhasathi. He is swacharya - There is nothing in the world, out side this knowledge. His devotion to God is such that I feel like a little young erring pupil before him. O, king you are blessed to have such a devotee in your kingdom. Your kingdom is all the more rich with him. I have no tongue capable of describing him and praising him".

The king said, "I am thankful to you O, saint! How can I honour you to express my gratitude! The stipulated prize-amount is too small for the erudition, wisdom and skill you have displayed, I am overjoyed, and I am fumbling as to how to honour you. I offer half my kingdom to you", so saying the king embraced Vishnu Chittha in all fatherly affection, while the queen was standing near with a motherly heart.

Vishnu Chittha observed in a serene and prayerful attitude thus - "There is specially nothing great about myself, This individual. All is due to Lord Sri Krishna's grace! I had long ago dedicated myself, this body and this soul to the Lord. If I have spoken so long on the truth of life and philosophy, I also wonder how I could speak, and where that

knowledge had remained hidden in me till to-day! The boy prince Dhruva praised extempore Lord Vishnu in such splendid manner of awareness and in such elegant style of expression just when Lord Vishnu put his blessing "Srihasta" (sacred hand) on his head; The boy devotee Prahlada poured out such unpremeditated diving thoughts when Lord Nrisimha showered his gracious looks on him; by whom was Adikavi Valmiki taught to be able to produce such splendid epic, Ramayana? Could the vast minded Vyasa Parasara produce such great literature of diverse splendours with the help of any learning from any human teacher?.... My merit, if there were any, is out of Lord Sri Krishna's grace.

"I am in surrender to the omnipresent life-fore, Sri Vishnu. I am selfless having surrendered myself" to the Lord. I don't have an independent existence of my own. I live in the Lord and Lord lives in me. I have nothing to crave for.

"I am a sarvasangaparithyagi having renounced everything, wordly and having any binding and I live in utter detachment. Why do you, O, king, attach me to this prize-amount? What purpose is there for me with this amount of gold coins and precious stones. They are just circular metal toys and stones respectively for me. I am with the universal Lord, who is the source of wealth. I lack nothing."

"A person, with a spirit of surrender, is selfless. When he is selfless he craves for none except he craves intensely to serve his fellowmen. I pray to Ananthakalyanaguna Prapurna (God, the embodiment of innumerable auspicious qualities) for the sake of the welfare of all (Loka kalyana). For a selfless soul Loka kalyana is his welfare. Sins can't approach a selfless man. He is away from bondage. O! king, the kingship and the kingdom shall only be factors of bondage for me. Allow me to live as a free soul. I am in bliss in my spirit of surrender and selflessness and I am prepared to serve you all in the way I should; I pray for you all. O,

king, permit me to get into the widerworld of freedom and bliss". Vishnu Chittha concluded his answer thus and stood with closed eyes and raised hands.

The royal couple were so much impressed and inspired by Vishnu Chittha's words that they prostrated at his feet and said, "we understand your divine mission; we can't plead you further. But grant us one request. I have already announced that I would make you the ruler of half of my kingdom; my word should not go unhonoured and unimplemented. For the satisfaction of my soul I adorn your wise head with the royal crown and keep you on the back of an elephant and arrange a royal procession befitting a coronation-style procession. That is my personal desire. Kindly honour our desire and bless us". Vishnu Chittha stood silent, and the king took in soon as a sign of compliance, and atonce ordered that a coronation style procession should be got ready.

The procession on the royal elephant commenced. It was about 7 p.m. It appeared like day light with a flood of bright lights. Vishnu Chittha was seated in a golden chair in a palanquin on the elephants' back. The king had placed the royal crown on his head. The elephant procession moved with sweet musical bands. The king walked on the ground like a vassal. The ministers, the high officials, the pandits and a large retinue of people were in the splendid procession. The sounds of victory, "victory of Vishnu Chittha" echoed in the sky. Vishnu Chittha wondered why all that honour was for him. He looked above with folded arms. He felt as if Lord Srimannarayana with all His heavenly retinue was there before him showering His blessings (It was due to his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava).

In a loud and ringing voice, Vishnu Chittha sang extempore auspicious benediction to Lord Srimannarayana (God supreme) in a mental state of ecstasy. The outflow rare splendid poetry spontaneously and profusely that flowed

out in sonorous voice from his auspicious mouth was like a huge waterfall from the dizzy heights of a Himalayan rock. The Prabandha containing this rare benedictions of twelve tamil pasuras is called Thiruppallandu, which is incurably sung in all great Vaishnava temples. (Thiruppallandu = Sacred Mangalasasanam).

Thiruppallandu gives a fine and glorious description of the innumerable auspicious qualities of God, His profundity of love and mercy to all creation and a grateful benediction of expressing victory and blessing to God. It might appear strange that a human being is blessing God. When you bless God, you bless God's qualities. That means, you wish that God's qualities and good qualities ever flourish in this world, which again means that the world should ever be good, auspicious and joyful. How fine and noble this benediction is! This benediction is the first of its type in poetry in world's spiritual literature too. It presents to the pious thinkers a new auspicious philosophy. It is an auspicious prayer and not a beggarly supplication. See the difference between these two lines - (1) God, hallowed be thy name! (2) God, give me wealth, health and joy. The first belongs to Thiruppallandu's way of benediction with a spirit of selflessness and service, whereas the second indicates a begging for comforts which is of a selfish nature.

The burden of Thiruppallandu runs thus in Tamil - **"Pallandu, Pallandu, Pallayirattandu, Palukodu nurayiram"**. It means - *"victory or Mangalam to God! Victory of God! Thousand times! a lakh times! a crore times! innumerable times! victory to God for thousand years, for crores of years! For ever"*.

What is God? It is the supreme omnipresent force, pervading all through the limitless space. So when you say "auspiciousness or mangalam to God", it means "auspiciousness or Mangalam to all creation in the universe". The splendour of the universe is indesirable; so also the

splendour and the aspects of creation are indescribable. The Vishnu Samslesha Bhava of Vishnu Chittha is such that he wishes the whole universe to be auspicious and blessed.

Such was the uniqueness of Thiruppallandu as it flowed down from the auspicious mouth of Vishnu Chittha. King Sreevallabhadeva and all other pandits felt surprised and joyful to hear Thiruppallandu from his mouth. They wondered at his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. The king applauded Vishnu Chittha for his piety, erudition and spiritual wisdom saying, 'O! Vishnu Chittha! People had long before realized your Vishnu Samslesha Bhava and rightly called you Vishnu Chittha. Now it is clear to all and to myself, as how well you deserve the name in the true sense of the word! You are really Vishnu Chittha! Victory to you, Vishnu Chittha, your Vishnu Samslesha Bhava and your rare and true philosophy! You are really Dwijakula Thilaka! (supreme among Dwija or Brahmin caste pandits and devotees). No Dwija or Brahmin by caste can be equal to you. I am extremely happy to call you by these sacred names, Dwijakula Thilaka and Vishnu Chittha! I bow in salutation to you, O, Vishnu Chittha and Dwijakula Thilaka - **Dwijakula Thilakantham Vishnu chittham Namami**".

I shall deal with this Dravida Prabandha, Thiruppallandu, again in some detail towards the close of this chapter along with the equally great Tamil Prabandha, Thiruppavi of Vishnu Chittha's daughter, Andal, after covering the biographical parts.



Āndāl



Andal is presented in the Dravida Prabandha as the daughter of Vishnu Chittha. The story as to how Andal providentially became the daughter of Vishnu Chittha, an unmarried Brahmin saint, is really wonderful.

Vishnu Chittha, whose abode was a hermitage made of leafy branches in the garden adjacent to Sri Krishna temple of Srivilliputtur, was everyday watering the flower plants and Thulasi plants, plucking the blossoms and Thirutthulai

Dalams (Thiru-tthulai = sacred Thulasi. Dalas = leaves), making beautiful garlands with them and was offering them with deep devotion to the Lord in the temple. One early morning, when he was moving about in the Thulasi Vana (Tulasi Vana = Thulasi garden) he suddenly espied, at the foot of a cluster of Thulasi plants, a tiny little girl baby, whose smiles and movements of limbs resembled the fine gentle flutter of the petals of the golden lotus. It was indeed a feast to his eyes and to his mind. Vishnu Chittha, who was a real devotee of intense Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, felt that it was the will of God that he should become a father, and that it was the only way perhaps how he could get a baby. He felt he was destined to adopt the baby and to bring her up. Who her parents were, why and how the baby was abandoned there alone were points unknown to anybody; God alone knows it! As her parentage was not traceable, and as she displayed extraordinary features of beauty, and divinity in course of time, she was described by Vishnu Chittha and his disciples as "Ayonija". (Ayonija = a baby who is not born

to human parents; a baby who is not born out of any womb). In Dravida Prabandhas, she is described as Ayonija.

Vishnu Chittha received the baby and was bringing it up the baby with care and affection. He was her father, mother and protector. As the baby was discovered lying on the ground, just like the Sita of Ramayana epic, Vishnu Chittha named her "Godadevi". (Goda = Earth, Goda Devi = the girl who emanated from the earth). "Godadevi" was the same as "Bhudevi". This was the story of the foster father Vishnu Chittha and the foster daughter, Godadevi.

Godadevi was growing up fast in all beauty of body and splendour of mind, like the moon after the New moon day. Her presence was an object of decoration for the Thulasi vana. Her appearance, with the most symmetrically built physique of the golden hue, her smiles, her bright looks and her pleasing movements and manners afforded delight and wonder. She was of angelic beauty and all thought she was the incarnation of Bhudevi, Sri Vishnumurthy's consort. So, all the disciples of Vishnu Chittha looked upon her not only with love and affection but also with respect and wonder. She appeared as an incarnation of beauty, wisdom and piety, and if three aspects are pooled together they can be termed "divinity".

From her childhood onwards, Godadevi's temperaments and attitudes were different from those of the children of her age. She never played with other children. She preferred to be in solitude always. Except with her father, she never spoke to anybody else. Often she was found musing within herself in contemplation, sometimes laughing and jumping and on at occasions sporting in a rare emotional "Samslesha Bhava". She appeared as a philosophical genius of a saintly nature; she was a girl saint. She appeared pious and devotional, a rare aspect in a person of her tender age. She was helping her father, Vishnu Chittha in watering the flower plants, in plucking the flowers and Thiruthulai and in

preparing the garlands for their temple God, Sri Krishna. She followed her father like a shadow in all divine services of preparing garlands, worship, prayer and philosophical discourses, which Vishnu Chittha was having with his pupils (disciples or sishyas). She was always found in an ecstasy of joy in any activity during the day time; during sleep also she was often found mutters with smiles God's auspicious names. Nature was her playmate. Neither the father nor his disciples could intervene in her movements and activities. She was allowed to have her own way, for everybody treated her as an angel. In her presence, they all conducted themselves in respect, reserve and discipline. There was no place for fun and frolic in her presence. When in the afternoon, Vishnu Chittha was engaging his disciples with his discourses on philosophical topics such as Vaishnava Bhava, Moksha Bhava, Saranagathi Bhava and Swartharahithya Bhava (the idea of the Omnipresence of God, the state of freedom from sin, the feeling of surrender and the spirit of selflessness respectively), she used to squat near her father in rapt attention of a devotional nature and posture.

Unlike other scholars she would not express any doubts. She was seen in gentle smiles of understanding and appreciation, and she sat like a saint in penance with half closed eyes. She never conversed with others; even her conversation with her father were brief. She was a girl only in appearance, but in all other aspects she was a saint of rare devotion and discipline. She was Ekasanthagrahi (Ekasanthagrahi = a person capable of understanding and reciting any literacy piece by the first reading or hearing itself. All the Alvars were Ekasanthagrahis, and swacharyas as already stated). Hence at a tender age of ten years even, she was a profound scholar in Tamil and Sanskrit. Her handwriting was beautiful like rare drawings and paintings. Her writing (Hand-writing) inspired all others to nobler sentiments, like the ocean which receiving all waters from

heaven through rain and from earth through rivers, was ever full, she was a prodigy of all knowledge and wisdom. She inspired pleasure and wonder in the minds of all the Brahmin disciples of Vishnu Chittha.

One day, there was a strange occurrence. That evening Vishnu Chittha, who prepared a beautiful garland of fragrant flowers and Thulasi, hung in on to a wooden peg of the wooden pillar within the hermitage, and went out into the garden for a leisurely stroll. He had to go to the temple only after sunset to offer the garland at the temple for the evening worship. Later when he returned to his abode, he saw from a little distance from without, Godadevi, who, having worn the garland round her neck, was looking into a mirror hanging against a wooden pillar and was enjoying the sight of her own reflection, which, she amusingly felt within deserved to be that of Lord Krishna's consort. Vishnu Chittha who was struck with a sense of dismay at the unpious act, entered his abode, shouting rather in a suppressed and troubled voice, "Goda! my ignorant daughter! What is it that you are doing? What a great blunder has been committed to the divinity. How is it that you have chosen to wear the garland intended to be offered to God in the temple? The garland is made impure and it is unworthy of God's worship? It is now past sun-set. There is no time to pluck fresh flowers and to prepare a fresh another garland! It is time for temple worship, and the temple bells are being heard! To-night God will not have a garland from my hands! This is an interruption to my daily duty of offering a garland to Lord Krishna, which I have been doing for so many years. What a great mistake you have committed! What am I to do now?" He felt mentally troubled and upset. Godadevi observed perfect silence. She was neither frightened, nor sorry; she was just gentle and silent.

That night Vishnu Chittha could not get sound sleep. He was over whelmed with the thought of the occurrence of that evening. He was often dreaming about his supposed

wrong done to God (Daivāpachāram = Daiva + Apachāram = Daiva = God, apachāram = wrong act)

Vishnu Chittha, who had been even in "Vishnu Samslesha Bhava" and a state of Paramananda, began to ponder over the wrong committed to God and how to atone for it! Vishnu Chittha was not an ordinary and blind devotee. He was a great philosopher and "was aware of what he was in close relation to God". (Ātmagñāni) - In his emotional Samslesha Bhava, he used to feel he was king Dasaratha and enjoyed mentally the pleasure of Rama's presence. He used to be in "Samslesha Bhava" with Yasōda Dēvi and was enjoying mentally the presence of Sri Krishna. Such Vishnu Chittha now began to consider sympathetically the mental attitude of his daughter, Godadevi - "I have been observing that Godadevi, from her early days of walking and speaking, has been always in Krishna Samslesha Bhava. She prefers to be in solitude; she talks within herself and to herself. She laughs within herself, she laughs and talks to herself while she jumps, plays and dances as if she has a play-fellow by her side. This play - fellow must be her picture of Sri Krishna! She loves Sri Krishna and lives mentally with Him, when she alone sees in her imagination or samslesha bhava, Vishnu is omnipresent. He is Ātmabhāva of the devotee. (Ātmabhāva = Born within the mind). The mind of a person thinking of Vishnu is Vaishnava. (Vaishnava = of Vishnu, of the omnipresent).

As Sri Mahalakshmi is said to live in Vishnu's heart, so also Vishnu dwells in His devotee's heart. If Godadevi were an ordinary human lass, it is surely wrong if she wears a garland intended for God's worship. But she is Vishnu Samsleshini (living in mental emotion with Vishnu) and hence there is not wrong, in fact, if she wears the garland intended to God. So I need not bother about this any more. Further, when I found fault with Godadevi this evening and admonished her for her unrighteous action, she might have felt aggrieved. She might have felt that she was treated by

me unsympathetically and unreasonably. As Godadevi is Vishnu - samsleshini (living with Vishnu mentally), Vishnu, who lives in her, might have felt aggrieved. He might have felt that He is not recognized and understood". Thus thinking in a frenzy, Vishnu Chittha had wink of slumber. Owing to his mental reconciliation with the evening's strange occurrence, and owing to his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, Vishnu Chittha imagined to have seen Vishnumurthy approving of Godadevi's act of wearing the garland! On further pondering over, Vishnu Chittha felt satisfied with what had happened.

The occurrence gave him an opportunity to gauge the Vishnu Samslesha Bhava of his beloved and noble daughter. He felt himself wrong to have admonished the innocent and divine Godadevi. He alluded the situation to Sabari (of Ramayana epic) who, with an ardent and pious intention to offer the best and the sweetest fruits to Sreerama in the forest, bit a little piece from each fruit, like a parrot, to test the quality of the fruit. It was quite essential for men to understand the attitudes and the ways of devotees. All their actions were well intentioned. Vishnu Chittha now began to doubt if he could equal his daughter in Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. He felt, in fact, proud of his daughter, as it was natural that parents always felt happy at the merits of their children.

The next morning Vishnu Chittha rose up from bed and was eager to see Godadevi, who was not near. She had already risen up from bed, and was playing in the Thulasi vana. Vishnu Chittha saw her from a little distance. She was running round the cluster of Thulasi plants as if trying to catch somebody. She was in Samslesha Bhava with Sri Krishna. She was laughing and uttering the name of Krishna, she was calling Krishna; she was praising Krishna. Vishnu Chittha observed all this in a state of joy and piety. He could clearly understand her unique Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. He did not know whether he should embrace his little daughter

and kiss her, or whether he should prostrate on her feet for her exalted piety!

He suddenly turned back and saw the garland of flowers and Thulasi hanging from the wooden peg of the wooden pillar. It appeared as fresh then as it did the previous night. Without any suspicion or hesitation, he carried the garland to the temple and offered it to Lord Krishna in the temple for the morning worship (Suprabhatharchana = su + prabhatha + Archana = Auspicious or pleasant + morning time + worship). Vishnu Chittha in his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava felt to see that the garland shone round the neck Sri Krishna Idol with double the luster and splendour. With this feeling of joy and satisfaction, Vishnu Chittha returned to his garden and found Godadevi still sporting with her mentally imagined Krishna. He wondered at her Sri Krishna Samslesha Bhava.

Andal, who returned to the hermitage, saw her father, Vishnu Chittha, who, she thought had been long observing her while playing in the Tulasi Vana; she felt a bit shy for a moment and came and sat affectionately on her father's lap. Vishnu Chittha felt happy to realize that Godadevi did not take his admonishing her the previous night, seriously. He felt extremely happy to think that Godadevi was Bhudevi, that providence gave her to him and that she would be a source of help and happiness to him. The doubt always haunted his mind whether he should treat her as a daughter with parental love, or he should worship her as Goddess Jagajjanani (The universal mother). His joy knew no bounds. The relationship between father and daughter, their mental love and affection and their mutual regard towards each other were aspects even beyond the grasp of the devotees.

By the age of twelve, Godadevi acquired profound erudition and scholarship in Tamil and Sanskrit. She was reading all the books in Tamil and Sanskrit belonging to her father and his disciples. She was drinking to her hearts'

content all the ambrosia of learning and wisdom which Vishnu Chittha was passing on his disciples. She was composing her own pasuras of piety, and was reading and singing them to her father and his disciples much to their joy and wonder. She was found at writing several books (Thalapatra Granthas, Talaptra = Palmyrah leaves. Grantha = Book). Her compositions were considered marvelous even to Vishnu chittha who had sung extempore Thiruppallandu!

Godadevi attained to marriageable age. She had decided within her mind to marry God himself. (There was no wonder about it, in fact. She was always in Samslesha Bhava with Sri Krishna, the Tribhuvana Sundara with the unique qualities of truth, beauty and goodness, who was the jewel of a prince and Geethacharya. She was already one with Sri Krishna mentally. Thribhuvana Sundara = The most beautiful in the three worlds). Vishnu Chittha, who had known her piety and Samslesha Bhava from the beginning, was not bold enough to broach the topic of marriage with her. He was afraid that Godadevi might remain for ever in her own imagination of marrying God himself. In that case he would not be able to fulfill his duties as a parent. The idea of celebrating her wedding obsessed him deeply and constantly. He felt it was his natural and bounden duty to search for her a suitable husband, to convince her of her marriage to his original status of Sarva Sanga Parithyagi, which was interrupted to some extent when he got a daughter with whose fostering and bring up, he became a Samsari. It was ofcourse providential, he took it all complacently.

One day Vishnu Chittha opened a leisurely conversation with his daughter in a calm atmosphere. Said he to her, "My dear daughter Godadevi! You say that you should marry God himself. I also know your love of God. But tell me, if you have studied in any epic any girl marrying God? ...". Godadevi bluntly replied, "what ever it was, as far as I am concerned, I must marry God alone". She was unflinching in her resolve!

Vishnu Chittha could not press her further. He knew her answer was not childish; it was not fantasy or frenzy; it was her Samslesha Bhava. Her decision could not be questioned any more. But what was it that he should do in such a circumstance? How should the matter be settled then? He was mentally troubled; his trouble could not be understood by any, except by a father in a similar fix.

Even in her tender age, Godadevi could produce two books of a pious nature, which were excellent in all poetic aspects. They were "Thiruppavai" and "Nacchiyar Thirumoli". Both of them contained Tamil pasuras of rare texture in content and style. They were devotional, lyrical compositions in praise of Lord Sree Krishna. They were rare productions of divine fragrance of the beauties of nature. Thiruppavai contained thirty pasuras and Nacchiyar Thirumoli contained seventy pasuras. Both the Prabandhas revealed Vishnu Samslesha Bhava of Godadevi. Vishnu Chittha and his pupils wondered at the excellences of literature and piety of the two books. The two books would certify that Godadevi had long ago dedicated herself to Lord Krishna.

When Godadevi announced that she chose to marry God himself, Vishnu Chittha and his disciples felt that she would remain a spinster all her life. They thought that she had decided to lead the life of a spinster. They were not bold enough to interrogate any more Godadevi about her marriage as she was the noblest saint in her outlook and attitude.

One evening, Vishnu Chittha sat by his daughter and wanted to enjoy himself in conversation with her. With a sense of love, sympathy and amusement he said to her, "My dear daughter! You think of marrying God himself. That is all well and good. You know God is Omnipresent! It is an Omnipresent force! How can you marry god who is formless (Nirakara)?"

Godadevi replied, "I marry Archavathara (idol) which is there signifying the omnipresent God, Vishnu".

Vishnu Chittha said, "Is it so? Then listen to me. The Archavathara is not one. There are very many in different "Divya Thirupatis" (sacred shrines). There are in fact one hundred and eight Divya Thirupatis! Which Archavatara do you wish to marry?"

Godadevi said at once without any hesitation, "Father, I have decided to marry Sreeranganayaka of the sacred Sreerangam temple. I have been hearing from you, your disciples and the several pilgrims and devotees about all the sacred Vishnu shrines and their splendour. I had chosen to marry long ago Sri Ranganatha!" The conversation came to a close then.

One day Vishnu Chittha was followed by Godadevi to the Sri Krishna temple of Srivilliputtur. He saw her standing before the Archavathara (Idol) in the sanctum sanctorum with folded hands in a posture of prayer. He then heard her expressing thus - "Swami! You are omnipresent! You present your Archavathara in all the Divya Thirupatis. You are Sri Krishna here, you are Sriranganayaka at Sreerangam. If your Ranganatha, receive me in marriage as your consort, I shall offer you in worship one hundred cups of "Chakker pongal" and one hundred cups of butter". This was a further and final testimony for Vishnu Chittha to understand Godadevi's intense Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. Her two Prabandhas, Thiruppavai and Nacchiyar Thirumoli showed that she was dreaming to wed Sri Krishna. They were only musings of her love for Sri Krishna. (Chakker pongal = A cooked preparation with rice, green gram dal, sugar, Jaggery, Cashew nuts, dried grapes, coconut, kernels milk and ghee spiced with cardamom pods, saffron flowers etc. This is the most delicious Prasadam in every Vaishnava temple!)

Vishnu Chittha felt that Godadevi was completely unworldly. He did not know how to get her to normally. Her

desire to marry God was intensifying day by day. She was often reminding her father about her proposed marriage to God, and she was in a hurry for the auspicious moment. She was singing her pasuras of Thiruppavai and Nacchiyar Thirumoli almost all the day time, and was in ecstasy in her Samslesha Bhava with Sri Krishna. She was imagining herself to be a Gopika girl donned in the dress and gestures of a Gopika girl. She would be walking about like a Gopika girl and feeling that she was such a character in Sri Krishna leela Drama. While dressing herself like a Gopika, while dressing her hair, while applying Thilakam on her face, while walking with pitcher of water under her arm, she appeared just like a Gopika girl. With such dress and makeup she would look into the mirror in exultation of joy and satisfaction. Her tone was changing its pitch and melody while she was singing pasuras to suit their meaning and context. Vishnu Chittha, who realized the indescribable Samslesha Bhava (feeling one with Sri Krishna) of his daughter, felt there was relevance and reason in the desire of his daughter to marry Krishna. But he did not know what to do. He was in a dismay and could not visualize or expect when things would come to a proper conclusion.

Vishnu Chittha was in deep and serious meditation in sympathy with his daughter - "I am sure my daughter will remain unmarried all her life. But I must give her satisfaction; It may be a fancy; but for Godadevi it will be a reality, I know; I shall take her in the dress of a bride to the sanctum sanctorum of Sreerangam and make her stand before the Archavathara. She would stand in adoration, we would worship, and she would pray. That might surely afford her satisfaction to her fancy.

Vishnu Chittha announced to Godadevi and his disciples his decision to celebrate the marriage of his daughter with Lord Sreeranganatha. Godadevi felt overjoyed at her father's decision, which was of course her long

cherished desire. All the disciples felt that it would be a happy and funny game; they thought that Godadevi would remain as a spinster for life and she would spend her life in the hermitage with the other disciples.

The Pandya ruler, Sreevallabhadevaraja, came to know about the decision of Vishnu Chittha to celebrate the wedding of his daughter, Godadevi, with Sriranganayaka of Sreerangam. He and the queen showed great respect for Vishnu Chittha since the day of his uttering Thiruppallandu.

The Royal couple reached the Parnasala (Hermitage) of Vishnu Chittha the next morning and bowed in salutation to Vishnu Chittha, who received the Royal visitors affectionately with due regard and honour, and blessed them. Said the Pandya king to Vishnu Chittha, "Swami, we are happy to learn about your decision to celebrate the marriage of your daughter, Godadevi with Lord Sreeranganatha. Soon we have come here to inform you that we shall render you all assistance and cooperation in the celebration of her holy marriage. Your daughter, who was discovered as a baby on the ground amidst Thulasi plants, cannot be an ordinary human lass. You, your disciples and all the people in our kingdom are of opinion that she is Ayonija and that she is Bhudevi (Goddess of earth, consort of Lord Vishnu). I also believe so. Let Godadevi's will be done. Let her wed Sriranganatha Himself. I shall meet all expenditure and make arrangements for this holy marriage. I know you are Sarvasanga Parithyagi; and I have great sense of gratitude and respect for you. Let us all take her to Sreerangam.

Let her offer herself as a bride to Sreeranganatha. Let us enjoy the pious scene of how Godadevi will offer herself to Lord Sreeranganatha with her singing of her two Prabandhas, Thiruppavai and Nacchiyar Thirumoli, and let us all be blessed. She shall be mentally gratified and

satisfied; we shall be blessed and happy. Godadevi, who could compose such celebrated Prabandhas at this early age, cannot, in all possibility, be an ordinary human girl. Just as you rejected my offer of prize-amount and the offer of half my kingdom and chose to be a Sarvasanga Parithyagi, and so she has decided to wed only the omnipresent, Vishnu; Such is her piety. We all know it quite well. She does not have a physical marriage. She had already mentally married Lord Vishnu. The proposed marriage function is just a formality: Let us enjoy the splendid and spectacular celebrating of this proposed unique wedding function!"

In the meanwhile, when the Royal couple were still with Vishnu Chittha, the chief priest of Sreeranganatha temple of Sreerangam, came there and began to talk to Vishnu Chittha thus, "Oh Vishnu Chittha, O! great devotee! I have heard that your daughter, Godadevi has decided to marry Sreeranganatha Himself. I also feel that her decision is just and proper as I have learnt about her Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. I have also learnt to my pleasure that you have decided to celebrate her marriage with Lord Sreeranganatha. It is all for her satisfaction, and for our fancy and pleasure. I have got my own responsibility in this affair as I have to act as the priest to celebrate her marriage with Lord Sreeranganatha. I know that you, a devotee living in this Parnasala, are not expected to arrange for a bridal dress, silk clothes, jewels and other marriage yagna materials (Yagna = function). I don't find any difference between your daughter, Godadevi and Sri Mahalakshmi of the temple. The Lakshmi of the temple is Devadevi (the goddess of gods and goddesses) as Archavathara (Idol), but your daughter Godadevi is Devadevi in human form. Hence I have brought with me the silk clothes and the ornaments of Sree Mahalakshmi of the temple to be used for preparing Godadevi as a bride. Let us decorate her as a bride and let us take her to Lord Sreeranganatha"

Vishnu Chittha was overjoyed with unexpected cooperation offered by the king and the priest. He himself referred to the Panchangam (calendar or almanac) and fixed up that afternoon itself as the auspicious time for the proposed marriage. It was the most auspicious Lagna (time) when Sreemahavishnu had received Srimahalakshmi as his consort from sagara (the ocean) and when Sreekrishna received Rukmini Devi as his consort. While Vishnu Chittha was telling them all that it was the best Lagnam for the wedding of Godadevi, Godadevi was seen near in all smiles of success and satisfaction, which was a spectacle beyond description.

Godadevi was getting prepared as a bride. In the yellow silk dress profusely golden laced, the golden ornaments glittering with all types of Nava Rathnas (The nine types of precious stones) and the flowery decoration profusely seen on her head and plait, the unique bride was in all beauty and splendour beyond description. She sat in the palanquin surrounded by golden plates of all the auspicious things, fruits, flowers etc, and the palanquin was being carried by well dressed devoted people. As the musical bands were moving in front, the Royal couple, the chief priest, Vishnu Chittha and a great host of happy people, men, women and children followed the palanquin. It was a grand procession in all splendour like the procession of Goddess Perindevi of Sreeranganatha temple on the Brahmotsavam day. (Perindevi = The Goddess supreme, Mahalakshmi. Brahmotsavam Day = The main festival day).

The procession reached the temple gate. Godadevi got down from the palanquin and paced towards the sanctum sanctorum quickly as though the place was all familiar to her. All others quickly followed her. She reached the gate of the sanctum sanctorum even before the Main priest could. She did not stop at the gate of the sanctum sanctorum even for a second. She walked into the sanctum sanctorum and was proceeding towards Archavathara (Idol)! Vishnu Chittha,

the Royal couple, the main priest etc. walked quickly following her only upto the gate of the sanctum sanctorum. They could not step further, for it was the temple practice that the main priest alone should enter the sanctum sanctorum. They were puzzled and were looking in wonder at her. They almost forgot themselves! What happened then? Soon Godadevi reached Seshapanpu, (the fourteen folds of the Anantha) walked over the folds of the Adishesha, reached the Lotus feet twain of Sreeranganayaka, sat at His feet, touched both the sacred feet with her tiny beautiful tender hands, and became one with Him. She reached Paramapada (the supreme state of bliss) at the feet of the Archavathara. It was thus how Godadevi who came to exist in this world in the Thulasivana as a human girl, as the daughter of Vishnu Chittha, reached the end of her physical existence at the sacred feet of Sreeranganayaka as his consort, Sriranganayaki.

While all were stunned and speechless, standing motionless, Vishnu Chittha, overwhelmed with grief, with a quivering body and quivering lips began to express in broken words, "Swami, Ranganayaka! where is my daughter, Godadevi?" and stood like a pillow, gazing at Sreeranganayaka. There was pin-drop silence for a few moments.

The Pandya king and the chief priest of the temple, in one voice said, 'Oh, Vishnu Chittha! The devotee supreme! Why are you sad? What do you feel sorry for? O! Dwijakula Thilaka! Who, rejecting the prize-amount and half the kingdom, sang Thiruppallandu to Srimahavishnu! Oh, Sreebhakthasara! Godadevi has joined the eternal soul. She has become Andal (Andal = Mother, the universal mother). She has become Ranganayaki, the divine consort of Sri Ranganayaka! You have thus become father-in-law to Sreeranganayaka! You are the greatest of all Alvars with this relationship with God. The world shall call you for all ages Periyalvar. (The greatest Alvar).

All said "A men and they expressed Mangalasasanam (benediction) to Periyalvar". The Archavathara appeared to have approved of all that was said of Periyalvar who was in his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. All the people that gathered there extolled Periyalvar for his devotion to God and for his offering of his daughter to God. It was all a rejoicing! It was all a divine experience of startling surprise to all. The temple bells rang loud, as if to utter a final benediction of joy and success.

The joy of the Royal couple was limitless. The king again said, "That day when you sang Thiruppallandu to God, I had the unique opportunity of telling you that you richly deserved the name of Vishnu Chittha in the correct sense of the word. Today I have the fortune to call your Periyalvar when Andal has become united with the soul supreme. I am fortunate and I am blessed, O, Periyalvar".

All extolled the life and greatness of Andal and all sang Thiruppallandu to Sreeranganatha.

This is the splendid story of Periyalvar and Andal.

It is now the proper stage for us to observe the Thirunakshatra sloka of Andal which enlightens us not only on the time of her within this world, but also the way of her departure from this world:

Sloka:

"Karkatē purvaphalgunyām
Thulasi kānanōdbhavām |
Pandyī visvambharām Godām
Vandē Sreeranganāyakīm"||

Substance: "I bow in salutation to Sreeranganayaki (Andal, the consort of Sriranganayaka), Godadevi, born in Karkata lagna of Purvaphalguna nakshatra of Adi month, in the Thulasi garden of Sreevilliputtur of the Pandya kingdom of world - renown".

Sri Nathamuni, a great Vaishnava devotee of the early tenth century, who at first started the Vaishnava Muth at Sreerangam and who had collected all the writings of the Alvars, gave the following sloka in praise of Periyalvar:

Sloka: "Gurumukhamanadhithya prāha vēdānasēshan
Narapathi parikliptham sulkamādāthu kāmaha |
Svasura mamāra vandyam Ranganāthasya sākshāth
Dwijakula Thilakāntham Vishnu Chittham namāmi" ||

Substance: "When Sreevallabha dēvarāya announced a large prize-amount to the successful pandit who would be able to determined Purushartha Nirnayam', Vishnu Chittha, who wished to succeed in the philosophical contest, exhibited splendid and limitless knowledge and wisdom, which he had not learnt from any Guru. Further, he became father-in-law to Sreeranganatha as his daughter Andal became the consort of Sriranganatha Himself. Such was the eminence of Periyalvar, the best born in Brahmin community, who was the real Vishnu Chittha adored even by gods. To such Periyalvar I bow in salutation".

Sri Parasara Bhattar, a great devotee, the successor of Sriramanujacharya to the Visishtadvaita Peetham at Sreerangam, gave the following sloka in praise of Andal:

Sloka: "Nīlathungasthana giri thatē suptha mudbōdhya krishnam
Parārtham svam sruthi satha sirassiddha madhyāpayanthi |
Svōcchishtëyām srajini galitham yā balāthkrithya bhunkthē
Godā thasmai nama Idamidam Bhūya Eṛvasthu bhūyaha"||

Gist: "The omnipresent Sri Krishna lies at rest on the mountain slopes of Truth. Godadevi, in her Samslesha Bhava feels herself as one with Him for she knows the "sesha - Seshi Bhava". (God is everything and the Beyond, which is called Sesha or remainder. Any creature on earth is a part of this "Sesha"). Hence she adorns the Lord's worn: Thus she claims her rightful relation with Him. To such Godadevi, Andal, I bow in salutation".

The Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, the spirit of surrender and piety expressed in the splendid literacy pieces or Prabandhas of Periyalvar's Thiruppallandu and Andal's Thiruppavai, are clearly dealt with by me in my other book, Sribhakthi Saram.

Sriramanujacharya (1017-1137 a.d.), the propounder and propagator of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha, was so much devoted to Andal that he was lost in himself when he was reciting the pasuras of Thiruppavai. Sriramanuja, who was extolled by his erudite disciples around as Yathiraja, Emberumanar, Karunasamudra etc, used to proclaim the greatness of the Alvars in respect of their Vishnu Samslesha Bhava and their spirit of surrender. When he once visited Sreevilliputtur, Krishna temple after becoming Visishtadvaita Acharya, he stood before Lord Krishna in the sanctum sanctorum and expressed thus, "Swami! The universal father! My sister Godadevi (Andal) got united with Sreeranganatha before fulfilling her promise of offering you one hundred cups of "chakker pongal" and one hundred cups of butter, which she had promised to offer to you, if you would bless her to become the consort of Sreeranganatha. Her sacred vow should not be left unfulfilled. I shall fulfil her vow here and now". According with the assistance, services and cooperation of his disciples, Sri Ramanuja worshipped Sri Krishna of Srivilliputtur and offered to God in the temple the huge oblation of one hundred cauldrons (not cups) of Chakker pongal and one hundred cauldrons of butter, and distributed the temple prasadam to all devotees and pilgrims. From that day onwards Srimathramanuja got the title, Godagraja (Goda + Agraja = Goda's + elder brother = the elder brother of Godadevi).

10. Madhurakavi Ālvār and Nammālvār



Madhurakavi Alvar was born to Brahmin parents of Thirukkoyilur, a place renowned for a sacred Vishnu temple, in chaitramasa of spring season. The Vaishnava devotees believe that he was born in this world in the aspect of Garuthmantha, the vehicle of Lord Vishnu. His original name, given by his parents, is not traceable. On account of his ability in literature to produce sweet and pious poetry, which he used to sing sonorously, he came to be called

Madhurakavi. (Madhura = Sweet, Kavi = poet). He was later called Madhurakavi Alvar on account of his deep piety.

Madhurakavi's Thirunakshatra sloka runs thus:

"Mēshē Chitthā samudhbbhūtham

Pandya dēsē Ganāmsakam |

Sreeparānkusa sadbhaktham

Madhurakavim Āshrayē ||

Substance: "I bow in salutation of Madhurakavi Alvar, (who was the closest disciple of Nammalvar) who was born in Pandya desa in Mesha lagna of Chittha Nakshathra of Chaithra month, in the aspect of Garuthmantha".

The story of how Madhurakavi preceded Nammalvar, the last and the greatest of the twelve Alvars, and how he surrendered to Nammalvar was wonderful and interesting.

Just as the bright red light spreads on the eastern horizon in the dawn before the rising of the sun, the advent of Madhurakavi preceded the advent of Nammalvar. Nammalvar was in fact the great bright sun dispelling the darkness of ignorance of the people of lack of understanding THE TRUTH. In that case the philosophic songs of Madhurakavi augured the literary and philosophical eminence of Nammalvar, to whom he surrendered, though younger. Madhurakavi composed and sang pasuras of literacy and philosophic excellences admiring Nammalvar and explaining the philosophy of Nammalvar.

Madhurakavi exhibited his genius even when he was quite young. Besides his innate interest for acquisition of knowledge of Truth, his parents, who were great Sanskrit scholars, led him through Chaturdasa Vidyas (Fourteen types of knowledge) by the time he came to the age of sixteen, before which his upanayana yagna had been conducted. (Upanayana is a sacred function at which a youth is initiated into Brahma Vidya or spiritual knowledge). Madhurakavi, in his sixteenth year or even earlier, took the permission of his parents to have a countrywide tour and to visit the sacred shrines of Northern India first, such as Ayōdhyā, Mathurā, Kāśī, Avanthi, Dvāravathī etc. before he would visit the sacred shrines of the south. But at the end of his grand tour of sacred shrines, he never returned home, and this was the most significant turn in his life.

Though Madhurakavi Alvar and Nammalvar were contemporaries, the former was older of the two. Madhurakavi Alvar later surrendered himself to Nammalvar and became his disciple. He survived Nammalvar for a long time and propagated Nammalvar's philosophy through his prabandhas, which he wrote and sang. This is the reason why Madhurakavi Alvar and Nammalvar, Sishya and Guru, should be studied together; for their lives and teachings are intertwined.

When Madhurakavi was in Uttara Bharath (North India), he used to hear now and then from the pilgrims who had visited the South about Nammalvar's spiritual greatness and divine splendour.

It has already been observed that Nammalvar was the last of the twelve Alvars, and he was considered in the prabandhas as the greatest for his biographical monographs and for his stupendous production. His life and achievements summed up all those of all the Alvars. It is believed that it was fore told by saints long before his birth that Vishvaksena, the commander of Sri Mahavishnu's retinue would be born in this world to establish the truth that "God is omnipresent". (Sarvam Vishnu mayam = Sarvam = Everything, every point of space. Vishnumayam = Is pervaded by the omnipresent power or energy). The divine principle that God is omnipresent (Sarvam Vishnumayam) would naturally lead to the principle of "Equality of man" irrespective of caste, creed or class.



Nammalvar was born at Thirunagari on the bank of the river Tamraparni in Pandya desa, in Vrishabha lagna of Visakha Nakshathra of Vaiyyasi month. Thirunagari was also called in ancient days Kurukapuri as it was

ruled by a king belonging to Kuru dynasty.

Nammalvar's Thirunakshthra sloka runs as follows:

"Vrishabhithu Visākhayāyām

Kurukāpuri Kārijam |

Pāndya Dēśē Kalērādaṁ

Shathāhrim Sainyapam Bhajē"||

Nammalvar's original name was "Maran" and his parents were Kariyar and Nadanayakamma, who belonged to Gandha or Nadar community. Their communal profession should have been "oil monger" or "toddy tapper", which of the two it was not clearly traceable. Most people believed that it was the latter. But it is ofcourse not important here. The achievement of the person was important and not the caste.

The family line is interesting to note. The first person of the family of an ancient origin was Thiruvalludivasa Nadar, a pious man of Kurikapuri ruled by a king by name Kaurava Maharaja. His son was Arandangiyar who begot a son by name Chakrapani. Chakrapani's son was Atchyutha and his son was Shendamarai Kannan, who begot a son by name Porkariyar. Porkariyar begot a son by name Kariyar, whose son was our Maran (Nammalvar), the hero of this story! All the people of this family from ancient times were Vaishnava devotees and they were connected with Vaishnava worship. Karikar's wife, Nadanayakamma also belonged to the same caste of the same Vaishnava faith.

The birth and the infancy of Nammalvar were wonderful; The couple, Kariyar and Nadanayakamma had no issues for a long time. They used to worship God Thirukkurugadi Swami of the temple of their place, Thirunagari. (Thirukkurugadi Swami = Sri Krishna). The temple priest who was very much pleased with their devotion, worship and goodness used to express in his own usual way a benediction to the couple, "Don't worry, God himself will be born to you as son!" What ever it was due to, whether it was due to the Mangalāsāsanam of the good priest, or whether it was due to their fortune. Nadanayakamma became pregnant, and in proper time gave birth to a son, whom they named Maran (Sri Krishna) to show their respect and gratitude to God Sri Krishna.

This baby (whom the parents named Maran which meant Sri Krishna) was of a strange nature from the time of

his birth. He did not open his eyes, and never sucked milk from his mother's breast. He was living upon air which he breathed in and breathed out. The baby appeared, from the time of advent into this world, as if he were in penance; his face was beaming with smiles and from within. (Anthassmitha Vadanaravindaha - the lotus faced baby with beams of joy emanating from within = A baby with bright shining complexion). But the parents felt worried besides being surprised. They waited for twelve long days hoping that the child would cry or would open his eyes or would suck the breast; but they were disappointed. They decided to appeal to God himself, who, they thought had given them the baby.

On the twelfth day, the parents took the baby to the temple, and placed the baby on the ground before the Archāvathāra (Idol) of Sri Mahālakshmi, the consort of Lord Sree Krishna. They prayed to the Goddess, "O! Jagajjanani! The mother of the universe! Lord Sri Krishna gave us this baby. It is you as mother, to bring up the baby; we are your representatives and your slaves as far as our relationship with this baby is concerned. Your will shall be done!" Immediately the very same moment, the baby boy opened his little shining eyes, and crawled on his hands and knees just as any ordinary baby of six or seven months would do, when the parents, the priest and other devotees present there observed with wonder; they could not believe their eyes as they saw the baby boy crawling out of the temple inner gate to the foot of the big tamarind tree that was there within the temple premises just near Krishna temple. He stopped at the foot of the tree, sat in Padmāsana posture with his palms on his knees as a Rishi (saint) in Thapas (Penance). He closed his eyes and was lost in meditation! What was the amazement of all that gathered there at the temple in thousands to witness this rare freak of nature! They shouted in joy that the tamarind tree was in the aspect of Adisesha (Anantha) on which Lord Vishnu spread himself in Vaikuntham, and that the baby boy was Alvar born in this world to uplift humanity

from sin, and to give them spiritual enlightenment as was already expressed in the ancient prabandhas and by the astrologies. The boy Alvar thus sat in penance at the foot of the tamarind tree, the huge trunk of which at the bottom with a wide hollow space one side facing the east, afforded him shelter from rain, sun and weather. He sat there without movement for sixteen continuous years and without any feeding. But there was a regular growth of his body with all vigour and the brightness of complexion.

The moment he first crawled to the foot of the tree and sat there in penance, thousands of devotees visited him day and night and sat around him gazing at his face and eyes. It became a shrine and a sacred place of pilgrimage. To signify that the boy Alvar was always spiritually aware and was not in sleep even for a second, an oil candle was kept burning continuously day and night without any break of a moment. The devotees were having relay squattings at the place day and night maintaining peace and silence around. They all tried to allow the boysaint to sit there in penance and to see what turn it would take. The boy saint sat there likewise for sixteen years to the wonder of all. The devotees, who had known something of the eleven Alvars that preceded this boy Alvar, felt that he was the greatest of them all and cried out in joy and devotion, "He is Nammalvar, Our Alvar!"

The birth and life of Nammalvar was a wondrous freak of nature beyond the comprehension of a scientific mind. As per the principles of human nature, the human baby cries out the moment it falls on this earth from its mother's womb. After some time it opens its eyes; it lies on the bed helpless and requires the mother's nursing and assistance for everything: The mother has to move the puppet-like baby this side and that side on the bed now and then. As months pass on, it begins to move this side and that side on the cot with quick and brisk movements of its limbs. Besides crying when it is hungry or uncomfortable, it smiles and laughs to see the mother or anybody near. Gradually as months pass

on it sits, and crawls and then it stands and falls and again tries to stand, it then puts its steps slow, then walks, then runs, jumps etc.

But what about the young one of a bird? The moment it breaks into this world through the shell of the egg, it moves, it eats, it flutters its tiny wings and it tries to fly into the air! What about the young one of any animal in general? As soon as it is born, it sucks the mother's breast, it moves, runs and jumps. So we conclude there is such vast difference between the nature and functions of the human body from those of a bird or any other animal.

Now if we try to understand in a scientific way the working and functions of Nammalvar's physical body, its internal biological system differs in functioning from the biological system of any normal human being. So it must be concluded that Nammalvar had a human body with a different biological system within. Often there are wrist watches of the same machine of the same company with different out-ward frames with different shapes, colours, fashions etc. So it was an account of a freak of nature, which does not come under ordinary human biology, that Nammalvar could have behaved, so the wonder of all humanity, you should know there are so many wonderful animals, birds and plants of rare types of life and rare types of existence in this world, which of course are not within our knowledge owing to the narrowness of our movements and experience within limited areas or space. There are certain animals and birds which live purely upon air, which the biologists have discovered; Nammalvar should have been a human being with such a biological system within, capable of living on air alone. Hence it should be concluded that Nammalvar was a wondrous freak of nature.

The freaks of nature in this world must be many; and only rarely we happen to come across a certain rare thing at times. Don't we witness a lot of change between two children

of the same parents in respect of form, complexion, mental capacities and attitudes? How much was the difference, physical, mental and moral, between the two epic brothers, Ravana and Vibhishana? What is the cause for such differences? The interaction in changing circumstances of the Thattva Thraya, the three aspects into which the universe is divided, the Achith (physical matter) the Chith (the creature or the plant or the live matter) and the incomprehensible omnipresent energy! Hence such a freak of nature as Nammalvar or any other freak of nature is also scientific, reasonable and rational. Thus the life and existence of Nammalvar was a freak of nature, incomprehensible to human knowledge and senses. Such was the wondrous splendid freak of nature which Nammalvar; and the normal word or epithet used to qualify such a freak is "Divine". The human tendency to qualify a break of nature by the epithet, Divine, is due to man's helplessness of thinking out of his ignorance, or man's spirit of surrender and selflessness out of his awareness and realization of the universal truth. All exceptions from normal scientific reasoning are generally termed "Divine" by common people. This has been true in every age, in every place.

Like all other Alvars, Nammalvar was a Swacharya. (Self-teacher = He was teacher to himself, he did not have any other external teacher). Out of all the Alvars, the genius and mental capacities of Nammalvar were superb, beyond description. The scientist in a state of intensive and continued thinking, otherwise called mental concentration and meditation, gets into his mental experience so much of knowledge of nature outside, which strikes to his mind a point of discovery or invention, and then through a process of actual experimentation or exploration, he arrives at the discovery or invention. Similarly a saint or a philosopher of genius, through a continued and deep process of meditation, otherwise called penance arthapas, gets into his private

mental perview so much of knowledge and wisdom, which he expresses later through his wordy expressions, vocal or written. Such was the case of the saint, philosopher - Nammalvar. He was a mine of inestimable knowledge and wisdom with a capacity to convey his knowledge and wisdom through his rare superb poetic talent in tamil and Sanskrit.

During the period of sixteen years of Nammalvar's sitting at the foot of the sacred Thinthrini Vriksha (Tamarind tree) in continued meditation, several saints, monks, devotees, pandits, scholars and men of genius visited the Alvar, having come from different corners of the country, and they wondered at what they witnessed. Some saints, pandits and scholars used to sit near the Alvar reading out all the then available scriptures, sasthanas and epics (The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Brahmasutras, the six sasthanas and the three main epics Mahabharata, Ramayana and Mahabharagavata) in veneration to the Alvar, and the Alvar who was Ekasanthāgrāhi, got them all byheart despite sitting in meditation! Some times he used to express gems of wisdom from his own state of meditation.

The saints and devotees, who observed the Alvar's style of meditation his smiles and his expressions, considered him divine. As already stated, he was a "Swacharya" having nothing to learn from others; he was the ocean of knowledge having nothing to know further from this world; he was a mine of wisdom supreme having to serve no other saint as a devotee or pupil. As he was the Alvar with the mission, "Sarvam Vishnu Mayam" (The whole universe is pervaded by the same omnipresent force), he felt the truth of this mission keenly; he exulted within himself what he was in relation to the omnipresent force (Vishnu) and he was alert in and aware of the universal truth. His "Vaishnava Samslesha Bhava" was inestimable. He was in smiles at his own awareness of the universal self; that was indeed for him a satisfaction, a joy and a victory, a victory the fruits of which were to be enjoyed by all fellowmen and the progeny through eternity.

That was why Nammalvar, in his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, felt to see Sreemannarayana of the epic on Garuda Vāhana with his two consorts, Sridēvi and Bhūdēvi and with all other retinue of Vaikuntha, standing before him in space and blessing him; and he appeared overjoyed (in his state of paramananda or bliss). The Alvar who was thus mentally enjoying the presence of the Thribhuvana Sundara Energy (The energy responsible for Beauty, Truth and Goodness) around him in his Samslesha Bhava, used to loudly utter benediction to the Vaishnava force which was both Siva (auspicious) and Rudra (powerful or terrible), and was exulting within himself; and all the spectators enjoyed this divine spectacle. The spirit, the attitude and the divinity of the alvar were profusely expressed in his loud expressions of Mangalasasanam (Benedictions or blessings) for the welfare of all creation. It should be noted that only the good will and Mangalāsāsanam of each individual in the society will enable the society or the world to live in auspiciousness (Sivam), peace (santham) and the wealth of joy (Sri).

(Let me point out to you, Oh readers, Oh citizens of the world, that the purpose and meaning of the greeting expressed by any people of any religion among themselves are the same, wishing for the happiness of the society. When you express "greeting" to your fellow being, you feel its meaning and purpose; don't do it mechanically as a blind custom).

Nammalvar, in his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava, had a mental experience with all the divine aspects of the nature and universe (Divya Vibhuthis), the omnipresent and omnipotent soul or the life force (Divya Ātma Swarūpa) and the splendour of the auspicious forms and forces of this word (Divya Kalyāna guna Vibhūthyādi Vaibhava); and his bliss (paramananda) was no profuse that it could not be contained within himself, and so it sprang out like a fountain through his sacred lips in the form of a splendid Gospel (Sri Sūkti), which was the jewel of the spoken word (Sri Vachana-

bhushanam), and which consists of four divine prabandhas (scriptures), namely Thiruvirutham of 100 Tamil pasuras explaining the essence of the four Vedas, Thiruvāsiriam of 7 pasuras, Periya Thiruvandādi of 87 pasuras and Thiruvōimoli of 1102 pasuras. Thiruvoimoli is also called Charama prabandha or Dravida Divya Vēda. The splendid "Sri-Sūkthi" (The Gospel) of Nammalvar was meant to enlighten, enliven and uplift the humanity from ignorance and sin. In later centuries, the fragrance of Sri-sūkthi was spread by the Munitraya or Achāryatraya, Srinathamuni, Yāmunāchārya and Rāmānujācharya (1017-1137). While the fragrance of Sri-sūkthi was spread by Madhurakavi Alvar, who survived Nammalvar as his disciple, Srimadrāmānujāchārya, the last of the Munithraya, the propounder and the propagator of Visishtadvaita Siddhānta, added utmost life, vigour and impact to Nammalvar's Sri sūkthi.

Nammalvar was an embodiment of peace (Shanthi), and his nature was quite alien to the feeling of Anger (Shatha or Kopa), and so he was called by his disciples and in prabandhas "Shathari" or "Shatharipu" or "Shatakōpi". (Shatha + Ari = anger + enemy = the enemy of anger). (Shatha + ripu = Anger + Enemy = The enemy of anger). (Shatha + Kōpi = The anger to anger = one who hated anger). Nammalvar richly deserved these titles.

As he was the greatest of the monks the world had ever produced, he was called "Yathindra". (Yathi + Indra = Monk + the king or the greatest).

He was famously called "Parāmkusam", as he was an elephant-god to the elephants in rut of all other superstitious religions. (Real religion is one which is meant for realization of the universal truth namely, the omnipresence of the only one universal truth.) A religion, which does not advocate the truth of the omnipresence of the only one universal force, the Vaishnava Shakthi, and which permits all the other superstitious beliefs, is compared with an "Elephant in Rut", and Nammalvar is compared with the goad which snubs such

elephants. Para = other superstitious religions, Ankusa = Goad = parankusa = a goad to superstitions i.e. the dispeller of superstitious religions.

Nammalvar was an embodiment of love and sympathy; he desired the uplift of all classes and of all castes of people, and so he advocated that all people without any distinction of caste, sex, age or language, should read the scriptures and should meditate upon God. Hence all people felt that the Alar was born in this world to uplift all people and so they happily acclaimed, "He is Nammalvar". "Nammalvar" means "our Alvar". The common man or the down trodden man joyfully and thankfully claimed him" my Alvar, our Alvar".

He was described by the devotees in prabandhas as "Vakula Bhūshana", "Vakulābharana", or "Vakulabhirāma", as he always wore a garland of Vakula flowers. Vakula (Sanskrit) = pogada (telugu). The red colour of Vakula flower with a small white space at the bottom signifies Rajoguna (activity) tinged with righteousness (sattva guna). The Vakula flower was indicative of the philosophy that man should be peaceful and righteous, and she should always be active rendering good acts, helpful to himself and his fellowmen as well.

Madhurakavi, who was the first and the greatest of Nammalvar's disciples, was a great scholar and poet both in Sanskrit and Tamil. Hence he was called Bhattanātha. Further he was a splendid songster. He not only composed pious songs in sweet and chaste language, but also sang them melodiously to himself and to the admiration of the devotees and listeners. Hence he was famously called by one and all "Madhurakavi". (Madurakavi = sweet poet)

The place, Thirunagari, where Nammalvar was born and became famous as a saint, came to be called "Alvar Thirunagari" to perpetuate the name and fame of Nammalvar. Nammalvar, while he was in penance for sixteen

years, acquired erudition in all scriptures and epics as already narrated, produced so much of divine literature, addressed his disciples on divinity and philosophy in a grand manner and style of the flow of the sacred Ganges, received the benediction from God Himself and gave his auspicious benediction (Mangalāsāsanam) to the omnipresent, Vishnu. To make his wisdom and spiritual experience more complete he started on a countrywide tour in his sixteenth year to visit all sacred shrines in the country, to explore the local histories of the places of the sacred shrines which were considered one hundred and eight in number, to explore the different philosophies (Darsanās) in currency in different parts of the country, and to visit the places where all the ten Alvars lived at various times before his advent and to gather the details of their splendid lives and works.

Madhurakavi, who was older than Nammalvar, and who was also born in the south, had not heard about Nammalvar when he had started on a country wide pilgrimage. Madhurakavi having toured several places in the North, came to sacred Prayāga, where so many devotees and saints gathered around him and were impressed with his piety and his melodious singing of pious and philosophic songs. Some admirers learnt from him his biographical details and his purpose of the country-wide pilgrimage. Among them there were some devotees, who had just returned from their pilgrimage of the south and who had visited Nammalvar at Alvar Thirunagari

Said they to Madhurakavi, "Swamiji! You say that you come from the south, and that you are touring the Northern sacred shrines and places in search of spiritual knowledge. Do you think that there are here greater sacred shrines than in the south? Do you think that there are here greater devotees, scholars and philosophers than in the south? Have you not visited Alvar Thirunagari before you started to the North? Don't you know about Nammalvar, who was born in-

Thirumangai, who sat in penance for sixteen continuous years at the foot of the sacred Thinthrini Vriksha (Tamarind Tree) giving spiritual enlightenment and uplift to the devotees? We have visited him and worshipped him. His birth and life are strange, wondrous and divine. His divinity is unparalleled. His piety, his nature, his literal and spiritual talents are beyond description. He is the polar star (Dhruva Nakshathra) in the sky of philosophy. He shines like the God of fire; he preaches with the strength of the God of wind; he reigns like an emperor of philosophy. We say that we had the fortune of visiting Nammalvar, but what are we to gauge his philosophical and divine depth? We have heard at Thirunagari that Nammalvar would soon start on a countrywide tour, but we don't know definitely about it".

Madhurakavi, who heard this wonderful account of Nammalvar, wondered, at the greatness of Nammālvar. He fell in a deep reverie "I am like the foolish hunter, who chose to leave his one bird in hand, and tried to catch two birds in the bush! I am really in a pitiable condition like the foolish shepherd, who, keeping his little lamb under his own arm, went on about the wider fields in search of it!" With the description, physical, intellectual and spiritual about Nammalvar, which he heard from the devotee - pilgrims, and with his own keen imagination, Madhurakavi was able to draw a mental picture of Nammalvar's dynamic and divine personality. He was very anxious to return to the south to visit and to worship Nammalvar at Thirunagari. But he felt that it was not proper for him to break the country-wide pilgrimage which he had at first planned. He decided to cover his North India tour as quickly as possible to enable him to return to Alvar Thirunagari soon.

Madhurakavi was always thinking of Nammalvar and his prospective visit to Thirunagari while he was moving from one shrine to the other of the remaining shrines, yet to be visited by him. His travel was purely mechanical now; his

mind was ever filled with the idea of Nammalvar. His respect and estimate of Nammalvar was so great that he was always looking at the direction of the south, where his cherished and beloved Alvar was. In his deep adoration to Nammalvar, he felt that the Alvar was a star shining bright in the sky of philosophy. In his *Samslesha Bhava*", he imagined to be seeing a bright star like glow in the sky on the south. He was often observing that glow of his imagination.

It so happened one day, most strangely, and unexpectedly, that Madhurakavi suddenly met at a northern Indian shrine, Nammalvar, who was also on the tour of the North (as already stated) with his small retinue of devotees. As soon as Madhurakavi happened to see Nammalvar, he felt as he were witnessing a rare and divine personal with a glow of wisdom around his face; he also felt that the star like glow, which he had been imagining to see in the sky towards the south, suddenly descended and entered Nammalvar, who appeared to Madhurakavi as an angel. Instantaneously, Madhurakavi felt he should be no other than Nammalvar, and prostrated on his "Vakulābhirāma feet". (Vakula + Abhirama = Vakula flower + shining beautifully = the Vakula-red feet). The omniscient Nammalvar smilingly uttered benediction (*mangalāsāsanam*) to Madhurakavi. Madhurakavi declared that he was the first rank disciple of Nammalvar. This was a rare and wonderful meeting of two great souls, a combination of rare and unexpected circumstances. The meeting was short-lived for the present. They departed from each other to continue their tours of the North with an agreed decision to meet at Thirunagari on completion of their North Indian tours. The moment Madhurakavi met and received benediction from Nammalvar, he felt a great and unknown satisfaction, and felt relieved from the hidden agony of his mind that he had missed to visit Nammalvar before he started on the tour of the North. The food was surely earned; only it remained to

be eaten: Nammalvar was seen and his benediction was won; what remained for Madhurakavi was to meet soon Nammalvar at Thirunagari and to serve him as his first disciple.

Nammalvar, after completing his countrywide pilgrimage, returned to Thirunagari and resumed his seat of penance at the foot of the Thinthrini Vriksha. He was almost in penance all the time, day and night, in half-opened eyes, motionless and still; but during the daytime (day time for all people, not for the Alvar, for, the Alvar in his spiritual awareness and awakening felt all time daytime; there was no night for him) he addressed the gathering of devotees, pandits and scholars on spiritual matters for sometime, and for sometime he would carry on his literal activity of producing philosophical literature; as he was speaking, the scholarly devotees were recording in books of Palmyra leaves. For Nammalvar, who lived upon air, and upon spiritual wisdom, time was one eternal whole and was not divided into night, day, week, month, year etc. The eternal time was a single beam of glow for him. A super-glow was emanating from the yellow bright body of the Alvar throughout, and his body or limbs cast no shadow.

A few days after the return of Nammalvar to Thirunagari from his countrywide pilgrimage, Madhurakavi, who also completed his countrywide tour, directly came to Alvar Thirunagari without visiting his parents and his home in his place of birth, Thirukkoyilur. He eagerly entered the Vaishnava temple and proceeded to the sacred Thinthrini Vriksha, at the foot of which was sitting Nammalvar surrounded by a huge host of devotees, pandits and scholars. On seeing Nammalvar, Madhurakavi imagined to feel that a glow from heaven descended on Nammalvar, as he had felt when he saw him first sometime ago in the North. Nammalvar's natural luster of physic and his spiritual glow of the face were such that Madhurakavi always found a

supernatural divine glow about Nammalvar's body and environs. That was why Madhurakavi surrendered to Nammalvar at the first sight when he saw him for the first time in the North. As soon as Madhurakavi saw for the second time Nammalvar, he prostrated on the ground before him with a determination, "Nammalvar is my Alvar, my Guru and my God. I have secured him as my God and guide and I have nothing to seek for in this world. I shall spend the rest of my life at his feet, in his presence, in his company and under his influence and benediction". He sat in devotion before Nammalvar, the incarnation of supreme wisdom, in deep penance with eyes closed. The Samslesha Bhava of Madhurakavi with Nammalvar was so perfect that he sat for a longtime motionless and still. Madhurakavi, who was sitting thus in Samslesha Bhava before the omniscient Nammalvar, was hailed as Alvar by all those devotees, pandits and scholars who witnessed that wondrous spiritual scene.

After a time, Nammalvar opened his lotus eyes half, looked at Madhurakavi, and with cheer uttered Mangalāsāsanam. A short conversation succeeded:

- Madhurakavi : "Which is the source for the soul?"
- Nammalvar : "The soul emanates from the body constituting the five elements".
- Madhurakavi : "When it is said that the soul (Ātma) emanates from the physical body, where does Ātma remain? What does it live upon?"
- Nammalvar : "Ātma lives in Ātma and lives upon Ātma".
- Madhurakavi : "When Jeevāthma (chith or soul) is thus related to the physical body (Achith), what does it experience, and where does it ramian?"

Nammalvar

"The Ātma (soul) experiences the comforts and sorrows of the body. It attaches itself to the body as a whole".

The conversation, rare and superb, on universal truth, came to a close; it was short, but it was complete and perfect. Madhurakavi realized, "Nammalvar is omniscient. I will follow him and lead my life in spiritual perfection". And to signify his realization and his determination, he prostrated on the feet of Nammalvar in utter surrender. All the devotees there looked in wonders while witnessing this rare scene.

Madhurakavi Alvar, in his Samslesha Bhava with Nammalvar enjoyed his presence before him in all fullness, in mind, in word and in deed. He became the first disciple of Nammalvar, the Swacharya, who was there in penance in the presence of all people, and composed a sacred Prabandha by name "Kanninum Siruthambu" explaining the life purpose and the divine wisdom of Nammalvar, and helped the salvation seeking devotees by helping them to understand the splendour of Nammalvar's wisdom and the efficacy of the spirit of surrender, the charamōpāya (The last resort to attain truth .. Charama + Upāya = The last + resort or plan). The Charamōpāya or the Panchamōpāya (the fifth way or method) was explained to surpass all other four upāyās (methods) or "Chathurupāyās", namely, Sāma (pleading), Dāna (a return or prize), Bheda (the fear of punishment or the reaction) and Danda (the actual punishment forcing a person to the desired end). That was why "surrender" was said to be Charmōpāya or Panchamōpāya. (Here the reference is to the Charama sloka of the Geetha, sloka number sixty six of the 18th yoga, "Sarvadharmān parityajya Mā suchaha"). Madhurakavi Alvar sang to the people all the prabandhas of Nammalvar and his own prabandha, Kanninum siruthambu in praise of Nammalvar, and helped the people to understand admire and adopt the wisdom of Nammalvar.

The substance and the significance of Madhurakavi Alvar's Prabandha, Kanninun Sirththambu, are dealt with in detail in my other book, Sri Bhakthisaram Part-II. This is just a biographical account and has to be kept brief.

It is learnt from the Tamil prabandhas that Nammalvar lived in this world for thirty four springs. In the immediate presence of his principle disciple, Madhurakavi, and in the presence of innumerable devotees and pilgrims, the Divine Nammālvar, sitting in the posture of Padmāsana in his usual penance, breathed his last. The sun, Nammālvar, set in the west of the sky of life. But he ever shines in the minds of the devotees.

Madhurakavi Alvar, who survived his divine Acharya, Nammalvar, continued to stay all his life under the sacred Thinthrini Vriksha, at the foot of which Nammalvar flourished in this world all his eventful life of thirty four springs. He had dedicated himself to the spiritual wisdom of Nammalvar, a personality of adoration to all devotees during all his life, and posthumously so far ever. Madhurakavi continued his life of spiritual service and worship at the foot of the Thinthrini Vriksha. He was always singing to the devotees Nammalvar's Dravida Vedas and his own prabandha, "Kanninun Sirutthambu in praise of the Alvar", and perpetuated the glory of the celebrated life and achievements of Nammalvar. He installed the Icon (Idol or Archāvathāra) of Nammalvar at a suitable spot near the already existing Sri Krishna shrine, and got constructed, with the assistance and cooperation of devotees and pilgrims, temple, towers, compound wall, the windy tower at the main gate and all other constructions required for a well established Vaishnava temple as per sasthanas. There were regular and daily worships at the sanctum sanctorum, and the regular processions and festivals were going on in all splendour of sacredness and festivity. Alvar Thirunagari became a famous pilgrim centre known all over the country.

The Nammalvar's temple and its conduct were "all for Madhurakavi Alvar, and he was for all his life the trustee, the manager and the organizer of the temple and its functions. It appeared as if the spiritual life of Nammalvar got extended into his disciple. Madhurakavi Alvar, who survived the Guru and who continued to propagate his Guru's spiritual wisdom.

Sri Nathamuni, the foremost of the Munitraya or Acharya Thraya, who could dive into the depths of the spiritual wisdom of the Alvars, expresses his piety towards Madhurakavi Alvar in a Sanskrit sloka thus:

**"Aviditha vishayānthaṛasshatahṛēhe
upanishadāmupagana māthra Bhōgaha |
Api cha guna vashāthadēka shēshi
Madhurakavihi hridayē mamāvirasthu" ||**

Substance: "I surrender to and keep in my heart always, Madhurakavi Alvar, who enjoyed singing of the four sacred prabandhas (Dravidopanishads) of Nammalvar, who cared not for anything other than the divine personality and spiritual wisdom of Nammalvar, and who ever lived in utter Samslesha Bhava with Nammalvar, and in whom dwelt Nammalvar's soul in extension".

In another Tamil pasura, Nathamuni expresses his adoration for Madhurakavi Alvar, the substance of which is given below:

"May we be influenced and be protected by the wisdom of Madhurakavi Alvar, who believed in the grace of the wisdom of Nammalvar and who recognized nothing other than the spiritual wisdom of Nammalvar who flourished at Thirunagari, the abode of liberal and charitable people, who gave, the essence of the four Sanskrit Vedas into Tamil "Thiruviruttham" and who was famous by several sacred names or titles such as Shathakōpi, parāṅkusam, Māran and Yatindra".

Besides his splendid work, "Kanninun Sirutthambu" in praise of the personality and spiritual profundity of Nammalvar. Madhurakavi Alvar composed many pasuras and songs on Nammalvar, which he enjoyed singing in ecstasy of joy and piety and which the devotees enjoyed hearing them from his sacred and sonorous tongue.

Of the four Dravida Divya Prabandhas or Vedas of Nammalvar, namely Thiruvasiriyam (7 pasuras), Periya Thiruvandadi (87 pasuras), Thiruviruttham (100 pasuras) and Thiruvoimoli (1102 pasuras), which all depict his spiritual wisdom, the last one, Thiruvoimoli is an exposition of not only his spiritual wisdom and scriptural knowledge, but also of his unique lyrical and poetical talent. That is why Nammalvar is called "Saint-poet" in Tamil literature.

Nammalvar was such a perfect divine personality that the Vaishnava devotees feel that he is an embodiment of all the preceding eleven Alvars in one, who is Nammalvar the twelfth. All the Alvars, particularly Nammalvar in a greater way, contributed much to the Vaishnava faith (Belief in the One, omnipresent), in recognition of which we find now conspicuously the Icon of Nammalvar along with the Idols of the other eleven Alvars in every well-established Vaishnava temple as per Agama Sasthras.

Nammalvar contributed to "Dravida veda Sāgaram" not only his four famous prabandhas (as already mentioned) but also he collected all the literature composed by the ten Alvars who preceded him.

Sri Nathamuni, the first Vaishnavacharya, in his time collected all the literature of all the twelve Alvars which he termed as "Nālāyiram" (collection of 4000 Tamil pasuras) which included "Thiruvoimoli" of Nammalvar, which is an essence of all the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Geetha. The Thiruvoimoli of Nammalvar commands a special and unique place in All Dravida Divya Veda. Nammalvar, who lived physically in this world for thirty four springs propounding

and propagating the truth and wisdom of the Dravida Divya Veda, ever lives in the minds of the devotees for all eternity owing to the unique and yeoman services of Sri Nathamuni, who long after the period of the twelve Alvars, collected almost all the pasuras of the twelve Alvars, coming to a grand total of 4000 and odd, which he called, "Nālāyiram" (Munayiram of 3000 pasuras of all Dravida Divya prabandhas of all the Alars + Nammalvar's Thiruvoimoli of 1102 pasuras). The fame of Nammalvar, (The Thirumēnu = The divine soul of Nammalvar), ever lives in the minds of the devotees though his physical body (Pāncha Bhoutika Mēnu) had left the world long back.

It has been well established in detail in "Achārya Hridayam" how the pure minded divine saint, Nammalvar, removed the ignorance from the superstition-ridden minded humanity.

Sri Nāthamuni extols the importance of Nammalvar's Thiruvoimoli in the following sloka:

**Sloka: "Bhakthāmritam Viswajanānumōdam
Sarvārthadam Shrī Shathakōpa Vāgmayam |
Sahasra Shākhōpanishath samāgamam
Namāmyaham Drāvida Vēda Sāgaram" ||**

Substance: "I bow in salutation to Thiruvoimoli of Nammalvar (Shri Shathakopa Vāgmayam = the divine literature of Nammalvar, Shathakopa. Dravida Vēda Sāgaram = the ocean of Tamil scripture) which affords divine bliss to the devotees, which makes all people happy, which helps humanity to achieve purushartha (life's fulfillment through the four purusharthas) and which is the gist of all Upanishads and the Sāma Vēda".

Eswaramuni, the son of Sri Nathamuni and the father of Yāmunāchārya, observes thus in a Tamil/pasura or Thaniyan, the substance of which is furnished below:

"Let every thinking devotee ever cherish in his mind the lotus feet of Nammalvar, the sacred Thirunagari which was the birth place of Nammalvar, and also the river Thamraparni on the sacred bank of which was birth place of Nammalvar who brought the essence of the Vedas and Upanishads into his unique work, Thiruvoimoli". (The Sanskrit Vedas were understandable only to a very few where as the Dravida Veda was understandable to all Tamil speaking people).

Yāmunachārya (Alvandar), the grand son of Sri Nathamuni and the spiritual Guru of Srimadrāmānujāchārya, expresses his respect for Nammalvar in a Sanskrit sloka thus:

**"Māthā Pithā yuvathayaha Thanayā Vibhūthihi
Sarvam Yadēva niyamēna madanvayānām |
Ādhyasyanaha Kulapathēhe Vakulābhirāmam
Srimath Thadanghri Yugalām Pranamāmi mūrdhnā" ||**

Substance: "I bow in salutation to the sacred lotus feet twain of Kulapathi Sri Nammalvar, which have been all relations (mother, father, friend and son) and all wealth to us and to all our forefathers".

(The wisdom and philosophical guidance given by Nammalvar affords all comforts to the devotees who follow his guidance).

(The huge host of disciples and devotees who were influenced and guided by their Guru and Acharya, Sri Ramanuja, in a Tamil pasura observed thus:) *"We bow in salutation to the lotus feet of and the spiritual wisdom of Nammalvar, whose Dravida Divya Prabandhas have enlightened our Acharya, Sri Ramanuja, who is our spiritual guide".*

This is indicative of the influence of Alvars in general and of Nammalvar in particular on Sri Ramanuja the propounder and propagator of the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha.

The spiritual service, rendered by the Alvars to the scholarly devotees, ordinary devotees and people in general, is inestimable. The ancient Rishis (saints) of this land, who originated the scriptures, meant them for the uplift of all humanity, not only for this part of the world, but of the whole world. (This was ofcourse the same with any saint of any time of any part of the world.) In course of life, owing to division of duties based on Varna system (caste system) as gradually and unfortunately evolved in the Hindu society or our country, the treasures of sacred scriptures imparting spiritual guidance such as Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmasuthras, Geetha etc. were within the reach of a few Sanskrit knowing scholars of only the caste uppermost community (Agrakulajas or Brahmanas), and they had gone far from the reach of all other sections of people.

Nammalvar, who is supposed to have belonged to the later half of the eighth century or the beginning of the ninth century, did not admit that one community of people alone were eligible to read the scriptures. (This was ofcourse natural justice to all people in general; and the segregation, the unhealthy and undesirable segregation, unfortunately crept into the caste-ridden Hindu society alone of this world). That was why Nammalvar produced Dravida Divya Prabandhas, containing the gist of the Vedas and the Pasthānathraya (Upanishads, Brahmasuthras and Bhagavadgitha) to be introduced in temples to be recited in worship. This was adopted later and was perfected in the time of Sri Ramanuja (1017-1137 A.D.). It was ofcourse with the same intention that all Alvars, preceding Nammalvar, also produced spiritual and Devotional literature in Tamil so that all people would be able to understand the knowledge and wisdom contained in the ancient scriptures.

Sir Ramanuja gave equal importance to the Sanskrit Vedas and Dravida Divya Vedas to be recited in worship in the Vaishnava temples, and hence Sri Ramanuja was

particularly called "Ubhaya Vedantha Pravarthaka" though all the twelve Alvars and Nadamuni and Yamunacharya were also of the same spirit of "Ubhaya vedantha pracharam" (propagation of both Sanskrit and Tamil Vedas).

The Visishtadvaitha Siddhantha originated in principle by Yamunacharya, and deeply propounded and effectively propagated by Sri Ramanuja, stresses the need and importance of the spirit of Bhakthi, Prapatthi and surrender (devotion, dedication and surrener) to be observed by every human being.

Visishtadvaitha Siddhantha is a philosophy and Vaishnavism is a cult. Hence there is Vaishnava Visishtadvaitha Siddhantha and saiva Visishtadvaitha Siddhantha. So also Advaita Siddhantha is a philosophy and saivism is a cult. Advaita or Visishtadvaitha in principle have nothing to do with customs and worships and forms of worship. They are universal Siddhantas.

The Visishtadvaitha, which is qualified Advaita, lays a stress on "Bhakthi, Prapatthi and Saranāgathi", which now remain as significant aspects of Hinduism as a whole. What ever religion a person in any part of the world belongs to, if he surrenders to the omnipresent sustaining power and shows the spirit of universal brotherhood, that aspect or spirit is of Visishtadvaitha Siddhantha. What is there in a name? A rose by any other name will smell as sweet! "Astvikam", in whatever form it exists anywhere is an aspect of Visishtadvaitha Siddhantha or Advaita; but as "Astvikam" is generally associated anywhere in the world with the spirit of "surrender", it is an aspect of Visishtadvaitha Siddhantha. These points are clearly dealt with by me in my other book, "Saranagathi or The Truth of Hinduism". A detailed account of Munitrayam, and the principle of surrender are given in detail in my other book, Sri Ramanuja Divya Vaibhavam.

The Rishi or the saint might not make any difference between the Brahma Suthra. "Thatthvamasi" of Advaita

Siddhantha and the Brahma suthra, "Ekamevādvithiyam" of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha. Similarly "Aham Brahmāsmi" Bhava of Advaita Siddhantha and "Saranagathi" Bhava of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha might not make any difference with the saint. But the "Aham Brahmasmi Bhava" does not seem to aid the uplift of the common society so much as the "surrender Bhava", which directly and profusely aid the common society to a spirit of brotherhood, peace and happiness.

The Dvadasalvars (Twelve Alvars) are like the Dvadasādithyas (Twelve suns as per astronomy) ever shining in the spiritual universe. They ever stand to give spiritual enlightenment to humanity. May humanity live upon their spiritual alms! (It should be noted that saints and prophets like the Alvars lived at different parts of the world since the beginning of civilization, and they gave moral and spiritual guidance to the people for their well-being. They are very many and their names cannot be enumerated in this small book. For instance the Nayanars of the south, like the Alvars, gave ethical and spiritual guidance to the people. There are very many like them)

All the twelve Alvars, wherever they were born, and wherever they lived or moved, all of them had visited sacred Sreerangam and worshipped the Archāvathāra (Idol) of Sreeranganatha and admired its significance of the universe and the universal pervading force. As they could appreciate the significance of Sreeranganatha idol, they could live in "Samslesha Bhava" with the Anantha Kalyana Gunas (innumerable auspicious qualities) for which the idol stood, and they experienced the spiritual ecstasy or paramananda". All of them were said to have breathed their last at Sreerangam. It was the case with Munithrayām also, namely Srinathamuni, Yamunacharya and Sri Ramanuja.

The Vaishnava prabandhas indicate that while the Alvars stood before Sreeranganatha in worships and praised the Lord with their splendid pasuras, Sreeranganatha admired

them, congratulated them and received their Benedictions (Mangalāsāsanams). This "Samslesha Bhava" was the "Sesha Seshi Bhava" or the "Advaita Bhava" of the Paramāthma and the Jeevāthma, the universal soul and the individual speak of a soul. The mutual exchange of Mangalāsāsanams between Sriranganātha and the Alvars, as felt by the devotees at the sanctum sanctorum, was a divine experience in their samslesha Bhava. It is learnt from the Dravida prabandhas that Sriramanujacharya also, when he had to leave Sreerangam on long exile, stood before Sreeranganātha in the sanctum sanctorum and uttered this Benediction, "Sriman Sriranga Sriyam Anupadravam Anudinam Samvardhaya". (May the splendour of Sriranganātha continue as usual day by day without the slightest interruption!) It might be a sincere and loving wish, but the devotee in his "Samslesha Bhava" would feel that God required with pleasure his benediction! This would be a supreme Bliss to the devotee, which would be possible only to a devotee in "Samslesha Bhava".

It was said that Nammalvar, on his successful completion of the countrywide tour and his visits to all the one hundred and eight Divya Thirupatis (sacred Vaishnava shrines), entered Sreeranganatha temple, followed by a big host of disciples and devotees to offer his worship at the sanctum sanctorum attended by priests, Acharyas, devotees and pilgrims. It was like the return of a prince, the heir-apparent, with his retinue to his father, the king on his throne, after his successful invasion. It was a strange, happy and sacred spectacle for all the devotees there and, as if their cheerful spirit of receiving, Nammalvar was reflected in Sreeranganātha Archāvathāra, they in their ecstasy of Samslesha Bhava felt to hear Sreeranganatha say, "Here comes our Alvar, Nammalvar". All the devotees there uttered loudly in a joyful exuberance, "Amen! Here comes our Alvar, Nammalvar". It was the rare, splendid and sacred occasion

of Lord Sreeranganatha and Nammalvar exchanging benedictions (Mangalāsāsanams):

(Man, in his spiritual search, and in his urge for spiritual realization, has to understand, perhaps the relationship between him and the omnipresent thus. The Alvar's philosophy in brief is to be reduced to this Samslesha Bhava followed by the spirit of surrender. It is in a way the Advaita Bhava and the Visishtadvaita Bhava put together).

The Munitrayam (Nāthamuni, Yāmunachārya, and Sri Rāmānuja) influenced by the philosophy of the Alvars (who belonged to different communities, who were of the spirit of selflessness and surrender, who lived lives of love and brotherhood to all fellow-beings, who did not pay heed to the caste distinctions and whose writings paved the way for the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha), when they preached the people in general about the lives and philosophy of the Alvars that all men born were equal before God, that they could express their surrender to God in any language and that all persons, without any distinctions of caste, sex, age or creed, were eligible for God's grace of deliverance from sin, all people of all communities ran to embrace the Visishtadvaita faith.

That is the reason why you find more Hindu population, belonging to all castes including the so called Panchamas, attached to the Vaishnava faith. And as Sri Ramanuja expounded the philosophy of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha on a scientific basis, based on the theory of Thatthva Thraya, and as he propagated the faith most extensively in his life time with a spirit of sympathy and brotherhood towards all people, they in response admired him so greatly that the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha came to be popularly called "Sri Ramanuja Matha", The "Charama gist" of which, (like the "Charama sloka of the Geetha", is found in the concluding lines of "The Saranagathi Gadya" of Sreeramanuja, the concluding lines which in original Sanskrit) are quoted

below followed by the English version. These lines contain "Sri Rāmānujāchārya Divyāgna" (The final mission and instruction of Sri Ramanuja): Sanskrit lines transliterated in English:

**"Anritham nōktha purvam Mē na cha vakshyē Kadachana |
Rāmō dvirnābhibhāshathē ||**

**Sakridēva Prapannāya Thavāsmīthi cha Yachathē
Abayam Sarva bhūthēbhyō dadāmyēthath Vratammama.
Sarvadharmān Parithyajya māmēkam Saranam Vraja |
Aham thvā sarva pāpēbhyō Mōksha yishyāmi Māshuchaha ||**

Ithi mamaiva hyuktham.

**Athasthvam thava thatthvathō madgnāna darsana
prāpthishu nissamsayaha sukhamāsva |**

**Anthya Kālē Smrithiryāthu thava Kainkarya Kārika |
Thāmēnām Bhagavannadya Kriyamānām Kurushva mē" ||**

Substance: "Falsehood has never been uttered by me so far; it will not be uttered here after. Rama ever speaks the Truth. (Rama = a person whose aspiration is to please all).

I surrender to thee now; I say I am thine. I will not be of any harm to any creature: that is my principle.

Abandon all superstitions dogmas and accept my principle of "surrender"; that will keep thee out of sin: Don't worry.

This is affirm.

Hence thou, no doubt, with your intellect keen, will grasp the truth of my philosophy; Be happy.

(Thine assignment be fulfilled = Mathkarmakarith = (sloka No. 55 of eleventh yoga of Geetha - Charma sloka according to Sankaracharya) = let me do your three fold duties: Srishti = to create, Sthithi = protect, Laya = To end. Let me render a good act a new; let me foster a good thing

that is already there; let me put an end to an evil thing that is already there).

Bhagavan! Let me fulfil thine assignment now it self; may I remember it even at the last moment of my life.

Sri Ramanujacharya Divyagna or Matha can be reduced to one phrase "surrender - selflessness - service", which speaks all philosophy in practice.

Thus the sweet perform of the Alvar's philosophy has been spread widely through Sri Ramanuja Matha.

This is all in brief about the splendour of Alvar's lives and philosophies.



11. How Srīmath Rāmānujachārya came to learn about Alvārula Divya Vaibhavam

The splendour of Alvar's lives and philosophies and the philosophy of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha are intertwined. The philosophy of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha and the splendour of Sri Ramanuja's life are intertwined. The story of how Sri Ramanuja came to learn in brief about the biographies of the Alvars when he was still a youth is interesting to note.

In this connection it is quite necessary to learn something about the boyhood of Sri Ramanuja here. (The complete life of Sri Ramanuja, his Visishtadvaita Siddhantha and his services to humanity are available in my other book, "Srimadramanuja Divya Vaibhavam".)

Sri Ramanuja's birth place was Sriperumbudur; Sriperumbudur is even now an important town in Chengalpoot district of Tamilnadu, at a distance of about forty miles to the South of Madras city. He lived a long, splendid and eventful life of one hundred and twenty years from 1017 to 1137 A.D. He was born in a Brahmin Vaishnava family of noble parents, Asuri Kesavacharya and Kanthimathi. The surname, Asuri indicates the nobility of the family. The word, suri, means a "scholarly pandit" and a "sincere devotee". The ancestors of this Asuri family line should have been great Sanskrit scholars. In fact Ramanuja's father, Kesavacharya, was a great scholar, an erudite pandit and a person of devotion to God.

Ramanuja's mother, Kanthimathi, was an educated and learned lady. She was a woman of spiritual wisdom to some extent, for she had been introduced to the study of scriptures and epics by her learned and saint-like brother Srisaila-purna while she was just ten years old. She had read a good

number of Vaishnava Divya Prabandhas. It had been her ardent aspiration since the birth of her son, Ramanuja, that he should in his early age distinguish himself as a great scholar and a Bhaktha (devotee). She was a pious devotee of the spirit of surrender and dedication (Saranagathi and Prapatthi).

During those days Kānchipuram (Kanchi) was a famous seat of learning. She was thinking of shifting the family to Kanchipuram in time to enable her son Ramanuja to study scriptures and sasthras there under the famous Guru, Yadava Prakasa, who was the greatest Advaita scholar in those days and who was running a Gurukula imparting scriptural learning to some Brahmin youths. Yadava prakasa was a follower of Sri Sankaracharya's Advaita Siddhantha, and Sri Ramanuja was one who belonged to a family of Vaishnava devotees since the time of its ancestors. In the meanwhile Ramanuja was having his education at home at the feet of his pious parents. Mother Kanthimathi was not only learned in scriptures, but she was a noble lady of progressive views. There was no place with her for superstitions and meaningless customs of the old. Now and then her elder brother, Sri Sailapurna, (otherwise called Periya Thirumala Nambi) who was a resident of Sreerangam as a disciple of Yamunacharya, the founder of Visishtadvaita Mutt at Srirangam, used to visit Sriperumbuduru to enquire about the welfare of his sister Kanthimati, brother-in-law Kesavacharya and nephew Sri Ramanuja. He used to give Sri Ramanuja, during his sojourn at Sreeperumbuduru, some guidance in his studies.

Ramanuja was married at a tender age of sixteen. Unfortunately Ramanuja lost his father within a few months after his marriage. Kanthimathi, in her unbearable bereavement, could not continue to live at Sriperumbuduru amidst people known to her. She was mentally preparing to leave Sreeperumbuduru to elsewhere live unknown and

unnoticed for some-time. But she felt that her son's education should progress uninterrupted. Hence she thought that Kanchipuram was the most suitable place for her residence after shifting from Sreeperumbudur. She was counting days at Sreeperumbudur and was making preparations and plans to shift to Kanchipuram as early as possible. Before the family actually left for Kanchi, some thing of unexpected happiness happened to the mother and the son at Sreeperumbudur, which left a permanent auspicious mark in the mind of the growing youth, Sri Ramanuja.

In those days there was at Kanchipuram, a famous Vaishnava devotee, by name Kanchipurna. He was also popularly known as Thirukanchi Nambi or Thirukkacchi Nambi. He belonged to Vaisya community. The story of how Thirukkucchi Nambi became the first spiritual teacher (Ādhyātmikachārya) to Ramanuja was quite interesting (Nambi = A devotee; a priest in a temple)

Thirukkacchi Nambi used to travel through Sriperumbudur now and then to reach Punamalli, a village to the west of Chennapattanam (which is now Chennai City). There was in those days at Punamalli a Vaishnava temple and a Vaishnava Muth. Thirukkacchi Nambi would visit Punamalli now and then and would spend time with the Vaishnava devotees there in spiritual discourses. The Vaishnava devotees of Punamalli considered the Nambi as their spiritual Guru and guide.

Sreeperumbudur was in between Kanchi and Punamalli, and it was equidistant to each of them. On his way to Punamalli, or to Kanchi, the Nambi used to halt at Sreeperumbudur for a few hours to be relieved his fatigue. He would take bath at the well at Sri Chennakesava Swami temple, worship the Lord in the temple, take rest for sometime at the temple and then he would proceed to his destination.

Ramanuja had heard about the piety and simplicity of Thirukkacchi Nambi, even when he was a boy, from his parents and his uncle Srisaila Purna, who was a brother disciple of Yamunacharya along with Thirukkacchi Nambi. There were all about fifteen distinguished brother-disciples of Yamunacharya, and Thirukkacchi Nambi and Sri Sailapurna were two among them.

For a long time it had been an intense desire of Ramanuja to invite Thirukkacchi Nambi as guest to his house, before he would shift to Kanchi for further studies as per his mother's plans. He was often watching at the temple to see if the Nambi had arrived. Ramanuja had seen him previously, but he did not familiarise himself with the Nambi due to difference of age. Ramanuja was just in his teens, where as the Nambi was in his fifties.

One morning at about nine O' clock Ramanuja saw most unexpectedly Thirukkacchi Nambi having a bath at the temple well of Chennakesava Swami. Ramanuja stood still at a distance of a few yards and was observing the Nambi in devotion. After bath, Thirukkacchi Nambi wore his walking stick and was about to start, when suddenly Ramanuja neared him and prostrated on the Nambi's feet; then he rose up and stood in folded hands.

"Who are you, dear good youth?", asked the Nambi.

"I am the son of Asuri Kesavacharya and Kanthimathi is my mother. Srisaila purna is my maternal uncle", replied Ramanuja.

Thirukkacchi Nambi, who had known the parents and uncle of Ramanuja intimately and who had good respect for them all, embraced Ramanuja, kissed him on his head and began to speak thus - "My dear youth, How does your mother do? Is she keeping normal health? Alas, she might still be pining for the demise of her husband, Kesavacharya! Ofcourse it is an irreparable loss of her! It is ofcourse

naturally not easy for her to get out of the bereavement and to get into normalcy. What can we do? We have to bear patiently! We are all frail creatures! My dear boy, your good father was like a Guru for me; I used to treat him with veneration. I knew the sudden demise of your father; I have not been sure where you have been since the unfortunate time of the calamity. Does your good uncle visit you now and then? Dear youth, how happy I am to see you here now! May you live long! May divine wisdom dawn on you!" The Nambi patted gently and kindly on the head and both the shoulders of Ramanuja, took a plantain fruit from his bag, offered it to Ramanuja with his blessings and said, "Dear good youth, may I leave? I hope to see you again here on my next visit. It shall afford me pleasure to talk to you more leisurely. Now it is time for me and I am leaving".

"Swami", said Ramanuja, "let me submit to your kindness that I have been awaiting your arrival here for some days. Today I feel I am blessed with your long cherished Darsan. I request you to follow me to our house, where you shall have a meal and follow me to our house, where you shall have a meal and rest for sometime. You can proceed on your journey in the after-noon. I devoutly request you to follow me to our house, swami".

"Ob, dear youth, how affectionate and respectful you are! Have you informed your mother about this, your invitation to me? Has she expressed her acceptance? Any way I have a desire and a duty to see your mother, noble Kanthimathi, and to console her in her troubles. But this is not the time for it. I shall choose some other early occasion to visit your home. On my next trip through this place I shall find convenient leisure-time, enough to visit you and spend some leisurely time with you both. You need not be waiting for me, or watching for my arrival at the temple. I shall directly go to your home and call on you! Now I have to proceed on my journey quickly and now itself".

Ramanuja humbly said, "swami, my mother has been instructing me for the last many days to await your arrival at the temple and to invite you to our house to dinner. She has been often, why everyday, reminding me about this. Swami, my mother will be happy to receive you. I earnestly entreat you kindly to comply with our request now itself. Please accept the invitation of this humble youth, your devotee and Dāsa".

Thirukkacchi Nambi was much impressed with the personality and pleasing manners of Ramanuja, and he was much amused with his invitation extended in such polite words. He could not say "No"; Neither could he plead for postponement. He readily said with a cheerful smile of compliance, "yes, let us go". And Ramanuja thankfully bowed to the Nambi, and began to walk to his house slowly and steadily, while the Nambi followed him.

On the way, Thirukkacchi Nambi asked Ramanuja, "My dear youth, your name?"

"Ramanuja," he replied. .

"Oh, your name is Ramanuja! Whether "Ramanuja" means "the brother of Sriramachandra" or whether it means "the brother of Balarama", both are dear to me!" observed the Nambi with pleasure. (Rama + Anuja = Ramanuja. Rama = Rama's, Anuja = younger brother).

In a few minutes they reached home, and Kanthimathi prostrated on the Nambi's feet and received him with great respect. They spent a short while in conversation about mutual welfare. Then Kanthimathi served food (sāppadu = meal) to the Nambi with great veneration. After taking meal, the Nambi was about to remove the leaf on which food was served to him, as was the practice to be observed by a nonbrahmin when he took food in a Brahmin's house. He was not allowed to do so despite any explanation of tradition and custom in vogue; Ramanuja devotedly and respectfully

removed the leaf and cleaned the spot. Then while the Nambi was lying at rest, the mother and son had their meal.

Later when all the three were at the leisure, Kanthimathi approached the Nambi and respectfully submitted, "swami, offer your kind Mangalasasanam (Benediction) to young Ramanuja, my son and your pupil, that he might become an erudite scholar in scriptures and sastras, that he might develop his devotion to God to the utmost extent, and that he might be guided by the splendid wisdom and philosophy of the Alvars".

The Nambi exclaimed, "Madam, Noble Kanthimathi! You know the tradition! You are Brahmanas belonging to Agrakula (the high caste) and you know I am born in Vaisya community, and I should consider your family people as Gurus (spiritual teachers). How can I utter Mangalāsāsanam to your son Ramanuja? I can only love him and pray for him!"

Kanthimathi replied, "swami, I know your piety, your devotion and your spiritual eminence; with these qualities you are greater than the so called Agrakulas (Born in the supreme Brahmana caste). You are Agrakulaja (Brahmin) by your spiritual eminence and piety though you are not so by caste. You are, and you must be, the spiritual teacher for Ramanuja. Kindly don't further put us to test. He is an orphan with out his father! He is young. We have nobody to guide him immediately. Be kind to me and to my son, and kindly accept him as your Sishya (pupil or disciple). Whenever you go this way, kindly receive our hospitality and bless my son".

Thirukkacchi Nambi was moved by the respect and humility shown by Kanthimathi. He readily said that he would do as desired by Kanthimathi. He said he would inaugurate the introduction of Ramanuja to spiritual learning that day itself. Thirukkacchi Nambi narrated to Ramanuja, who was respectfully sitting at his feet in Padmāsana and in folded arms, the biography and philosophy of Thiruppani Alvar.

Ramanuja was overjoyed to hear for the first time from Thirukkacchi Nambi the sacred story of Thiruppavi Alvar and his Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. Later during his visits to Sreeperumbudur, Thirukkacchi Nambi used to teach Ramanuja about Alvarula Divya Vaibhavam. He taught Ramanuja not only the biographies of the alvars, but also he introduced Ramanuja to their pious songs, sacred pasuras and their Divya prabandhas. He hinted to Ramanuja the Alvar's attitude to life, their realization of the truth supreme and their blissful state of mind in their Vishnu Samslesha Bhava. Sri Ramanuja felt overjoyed to hear the accounts of Alvars. He was impressed with the feelings of universal brotherhood and the spirit of service of the Alvars. Even at such a tender age, Ramanuja entertained an intense desire that his life should be on the lines of the Alvars and that he should devote his life for the propagation of the ideal of universal brotherhood of man. Ramanuja who was a Brahmin Vaishnava by caste became a real "Vaishnava" in the full sense of the term, and he felt purified by Nammalvar's gospel (Sri Sukthi of Nammalvar) of "Sarvam Vishnumayam" (The same, one and the same Vaishnava energy, Omnipresent life force, pervades the whole universe). Stimologically the word, "Vaishnava" means "a person who believes in and surrenders to the omnipresent life force."

The impact of the splendour of Alvar's lives on the mind of Ramanuja was inestimable. The Samslesha Bhava and the blissful wisdom of the Alvars, which Ramanuja studied deeply through all the Dravida Divya Prabandhas of the twelve Alvars, enlightened Ramanuja to evolve the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha.

A detailed account of the divine relationship between Thirukkacchi nambi and Ramanuja is furnished in my other book, "Sri Ramanuja Divya Vaibhavam".



12. The impact of Alvārs on the World of Devotion

As a result of the lives and the missions of the Alvārs, the spirit of devotion and dedication to the omnipresent was reinstated firmly in the minds of the humanity. The notion of the plurality of gods was dispelled. Surrender to one, and the only one omnipresent power was insisted upon as a spiritual obligation on the part of man, which would not only put an end to diverse dogmatic and superstitious faiths, age long meaningless customs, hatred due to caste and class distinctions etc. but also inculcate in man the spirit of universal brotherhood for individual and social peace and happiness.

All human beings are one. Their recognition of one universal sustaining force really helps them to enjoy peace and mutual good will and also to be away from sin, the untoward action.

The Alvārs were not blind idol worshippers. Theirs was not pure idol worship. They did not reject the existing idols. They were quite aware of the significance of the idols, the ideals for which the idols stood.

As already dealt with in detail at the beginning of this book, Sriranganatha Idol is an image of all the aspects and forces of the universe, and its worship with the awareness of this truth enables man to acquire the knowledge and wisdom of the universe and to realize what his individual self is in relation to the universe. Similarly, as already described at the outset, Sri Venkateswara idol with its two hands of Charamōpāya (The ultimate means, namely, the spirit of surrender and selflessness) and Abhaya (assurance of deliverance from sin) stands to teach the meaning of the Charamaslōka of the Geetha (Sloka NO. 66 of Chapter 18...) "Sarvadharmān parithyajya Ma suchaha).

Hence the worship of these idols, or the looking at these idols in concentration is not worshipping a stone idol; on the other hand it is unfolding the mind to and opening the eyes widely at the universe and the universal wisdom. The idols thus

grant the humanity gifts twain, namely wisdom and deliverance from sin. A mere visit to the idols in a mechanical way, serves no purpose as the recitation of scriptures or scientific formulas etc. without knowing their meanings. Hence the worship of these two significant idols (Archāvathāras) with an awareness helps the worshipper into "Vishnu Samslesha Bhava" (feeling one with the universe) and "Paramananda" (supreme mental state of bliss).

These two supreme idols, the lights of knowledge and wisdom, put together are symbolic representation of the meaning of "Ashtākshari manthra", "Om Namo Narayanaya". While "Narayana" signifies the knowledge and wisdom of the universe, "Om Namo" signifies man's surrender to the supreme idea, namely the universal wisdom. The spirit of surrender leads to "selflessness" and "service mindedness" with a love for humanity, which is "Bhakthi Bhava", "a Love of the creating or creative force and the creation." This is the essence of all Upanishads, the essence of the Geetha, indicated in the Charama sloka ultimately.

It was thus the Alvars established a world of meaningful worship and devotion. The Munitraya, Nathamuni, Yamunacharya and Ramanuja, later were enlightened by the spiritual wisdom of the Alvars conveyed through the Dravida Divya Prabandhas (The Tamil sacred scriptures). The Munitraya successively evolved the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha, which was profusely propagated by the last one, Sri Ramanujacharya (1017 - 1137 A.D.) who established and defended the Visishtadvaita Siddhantha as per Varāha Charamam, Rāmāyana Charamam and Geetha Charamam.

In the Vaishnava system of daily prayer (which must be so in any systematic faith) the surrender to the omnipresent Vaishnava power is succeeded by a grateful praise of Alvars and the Munitraya (Guru Parampara Stavam).

"The Alvars are comparable to ventilations through which a glimpse at the omnipresent Vaishnava light and energy can be possible. Amen! .

13. The sacred praise of the Twelve Alvārs

(Sanskrit slokas transliterated in English)

1. The following sloka was composed by Sri Parasara Bhattar, the disciple of Sreeramanujacharya, who succeeded the Guru to the head-ship of Visishtadvaita Peetham at Sreerangam:

**"Bhūtham Sarasya Mahadāhvaya Bhatta Natha
Sribhakthisara Kulasēkhara Yōgivāhan |
Bhakthanghrirēnu Parakala yathīndra Misrān
Srimathparānkusamunim Pranathōsmi nithyam" ||**

Substance:

- 1) Bhutham = Bhuthalvar, also called Pudatthalvar
- 2) Sarasya = Poigai Alvar.
- 3) Mahadahvaya = Peyalvar (the famous Alvar)
- 4) Bhattanatha = Periyalvar (it also means Madhurakavi)
- 5) Sribhakthisara = Thirumalisai Alvar.
- 6) Kulasēkhara = Kulasēkhar Alvar.
- 7) Bhakthanghriredu = Thondaradippodi Alvar
(Vipranarayana)
- 8) Parakala = Thirumangai Alvar (The skilful Alvar)
- 9) Yathindra Mishram Srimath Parankusamunim =
Nammalvar (indicated by his titles)
- 10) Pranathosmi nithyam = I bow in salutation (to you all)
everyday.

1) As already stated the lives of Periyalvar and 2) Andal and the lives of Nammalvar and Madhurakavi Alvar are intertwined.

2. This sloka is specially about Periyalvar (Vishnu Chittha) composed by Sri Nathamuni.

**"Gurumukhamanadhīthya prāhvēdānasēshan
Narapathi Pariklaptham Shulkamādāthu Kāmaha |
Svasuram Amaravandyam Ranganāthasya Sakshāth
Dwijakulathilakantham Vishnu Chittham Namāmi" ||**

The meaning has been given already in chapter 9.

3. This sloka is specially about "Andal", composed by Parasara Bhattar:

**"Neelātthunga sthana giri thati supthamudbōdhya Krishnam
Pārāthyam svam sruthi sathassiddha madhyāpayanthi |
Svōcchishtāyām Prajinigalitham yā balāth Krithya Bhunkthē
Gōdā thasmai nama Idamidam bhūya Eṛvāsthu bhūyaha" ||**

The meaning has been given already in Chapter 9. This sloka about Andal is furnished here as there is no special mention about her in sloka no. 1. above.

4. This sloka is specially about Madhurakavi Alvar, composed by Srinathamuni.

**"Aviditha vishayāntharassathārēh
Upanishadā mupagāna māthrabhōgaha |
Api cha gunavasātthadēka Sēshī
Madhura Kavi hridaya mamāvirasthu" ||**

The meaning has been given already in Chapter 10. This sloka about Madhurakavi Alvar is furnished here as there is no special mention about him in Sloka No 1 above.

So all the 12 Alvars (Dvadasalvars) are covered in these four slokas or Thaniyans.



14. Nithyānusandhānam

The following slokas are for pious recital at daily prayer, for, it is proper that the devotee should express his thankfulness to all the Alvars and Acharyas (Guru parampara) who gave spiritual guidance to the humanity. The starry line of "Guruparampara" begins from Lord Sri Krishna (Geethāchārya) and extends downwards to the Acharya now present before the devotee or disciple.

I. *Geethāchārya Sri Krishna:*

"Vasudēva sutham Dēvam Kamsa chanūra mardanam |
Dēvakī paramānandam Krishnam Vandē Jagadgurum ||"

"Sāradyamarjuna Syādaḥ Kurvan Geethamritham dadau |
Lōkathrayōpakārāya Thasmai Krishnāthmanē namaha ||"

II. *"Vyāsaparāśara" who conveyed the Geetha wisdom through his epic :*

"Thathvēna Yaschidachidīswara tha thsvabhāva
Bhōgāpavarga thadupāya gathīrudārāha |
Sandarsayannira mimitha purāna rathnam
Thasmai namō munivarāya parāsarāya ||"

"Samyagnyāya Kalāpēna mahathā Bharadēva cha
Upabrimhitha Vēdāya namō Vyāsāya Vishnavē ||"

III. a) *"Sriranganātha Archāvathāra" which signifies the universal wisdom of the Geetha:*

"The Sloka" furnished at the picture of Sreeranganatha at the outset of the book: "Thapasyēma"

b) *"Sri Vēnkateswara Archavathāra" which signifies the meaning of the Charamasloka of the Geetha:*

"The two sloka are furnished at the picture of Sri Venkateswara at the outset of the book.

IV. "Dvādasālvārs" (who interpreted the wisdom of the Geetha through their lives and writings)

All the Thirunakshatra slokas furnished in the biographies of the Alvars - Chapter 3 to 10 and the four slokas given in Chapter 13.

V. "Srināthamuni, the first of the Munithrayam" - composed by Yamunacharya:

"Namō achinthyādbhuthāklishta gnāna Vairāgya rasāyē |
Nāthāyamunayē agādha bhagavadbhakthi Sindhavē ||"

VI. "Yāmunāchārya, the second of the Munithrayam and Sri Ramanuja's Acharya" - composed by Sri Ramanuja.

"Yathpādāmbhōruha dhyana vidhvasthāsēsha

Kalmashaha |

Vasthuthāmupāyāthō ham Yāmunēyam namāmi tham ||"

VII. "Rāmānujāchārya, the third of the Munithrayam and the propounder and propagator of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha": composed by his immediate disciple, Kuratthalvar:

1. "Yōnithyam acchyutha padāmbuja yugma rukma
Vyāmōhathaha thaditharāni Thrināya mēnē |
Asmadgurōh Bhagavathō sya dayaika sindhō
Rāmānujasya charanau Saranam Prapadyē ||"

This sloka with its substance is furnished at the picture of Sri Ramanujacharya at the beginning of the book.

2. "Lakshmīnātha Samārambhām Nātha Yāmuna

madhyamām |

Asmadāchārya Paryanthām Vandē Guruparamparām ||"

"Asmadāchārya Samārambhām Nātha Yāmuna

madhyamām |

Lakshmīvallabha Paryanthām Vandē Guruparamparām ||"

Substance:

"I bow in salutation to all the starry line of Acharyas from Geethacharya Sri Krishna at the top, with Srinathamuni and Yamunacharya in the middle down to my present Acharya Sri Ramanuja".

"I bow in salutation to all the starry line of Acharyas beginning with my present Acharya Sri Ramanuja, with Srinathamuni and Yamunacharya in the middle up to Geethacharya Sri Krishna".



15. Conclusion

The philosophy of the Alvārs "Vishnu Samslesha Bhava" with the spirit of utter surrender and dedication (Saranāgathi and Prapatthi) is explained in the Geetha. The Vishnu Samslesha Bhava and Paramānanda (Bliss) and translations into actual life of Geetha knowledge and wisdom, which is again the gist of all Upanishads.

The Visishtadvaita Siddhantha of Sri Ramanujacharya, which is extracted from the Geetha knowledge and wisdom the lives and missions of Alvārs, gives a shift to social service, and hence the philosophy in brief of Visishtadvaita Siddhantha is surrender - selflessness - service.

The Geethāchārya or the Alvārs or Sri Rāmānuja does not advocate a life of Karma Sannyāsam (Renunciation from a life of action). They advocate an active life of righteous action with a spirit of social service: They maintain that Karmaphala Thyaga is superior even to penance. (Vide sloka no. 12 of Chapter 12 of the Geetha). Peace and happiness in this world can be established only by Karmaphala Thyaga. The Charama sloka of the Geetha (sloka No. 66 of Chapter 18) which advocates the spirit of surrender to the universal truth, assures deliverance from sin as the spirit of surrender fosters the spirit of selflessness.

An emotional and blissful spirit of surrender with awareness is the "Vishnu Samslesha Bhava" of the Alvārs.

"MANGALĀSĀSANAM"

"Mangalāsasanaparaihi madāchārya purōgamaihi |
Sarvaischa Pūrvairāchāryaihi Sathkrithāyāsthu Mangalam||"

